

Critical Dialogues

Slow Readings of English Literary Texts



Isabel Fernandes

CRITICAL DIALOGUES: SLOW READINGS OF ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS

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Contents

Preface	
<i>Maria Helena de Paiva Correia</i>	11
Introductory Note	13
Emily Brontë after Strange Gods?	19
Jane Austen's <i>Emma</i> : beyond Verbal Irony	43
Jane Austen's <i>Persuasion</i> : Testing Language(s) or Wordsworth Revisited	55
Bakhtin and Lawrence: a Possible Dialogue	69
“To be, or not to be, is still the question”: Identity and “Otherness” in D. H. Lawrence's Work	93
Cannibalism and the Bourgeois Order: Rereading Conrad's “Falk” ...	115
Words as Game: the Writing and Reading of Poetry	133
Matisse and Women: Portraits by A. S. Byatt	149
<i>Girl with a Pearl Earring</i> : Narrating across Media	167

For M.^a Helena de Paiva Correia and João Flor –
for their unfailing support.

For Carlos - with love and gratitude.

Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself – in the unity of my answerability.

M. M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (1990)

One has not been a philologist in vain, maybe one still is – this is what I would like to say – a teacher of slow reading: eventually one also writes slowly.

Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Readers and Philologists” (1886)

Preface

When the first essay in this volume, “Emily Brontë after Strange Gods?,” was published, I became aware of Isabel Fernandes’s astonishing gift of reading a literary text within the boundaries of a well-established theoretical framework. In the course of her illuminating analysis of *Wuthering Heights*, T. S. Eliot’s controversial essay is never mentioned. Yet, it is there, right in the title, questioning the reader. The last sentence of “Emily Brontë after Strange Gods?” begins with the following words: “In its ambiguous and open ending...”. The title Isabel Fernandes accurately chose for her essay challenges us as an ambiguous and open beginning, and the reader feels compelled to come back to the clear allusion the text seems to have overlooked. Accordingly, I could not but read it twice without delay.

Isabel Fernandes’s amazing capability of reading literary and artistic texts progressively pervades the entire volume, extending the frontiers of Literature to an Inter Art approach. In her choice of texts and in the way she deals with them, it is possible to discern not only the chronology of her intellectual evolution and academic career both as a teacher and a researcher, but also her theoretical framework in the process of increasing its resources and widening its scope. Her reading becomes more refined. The connections she establishes enlighten the works of art she focuses on. Her interests, her aims, her pedagogical ability grow steadily. The streamline implied by the first essay is still quite visible in the last. To borrow the author’s own words at the end of “*Girl with a Pearl Earring: Narrating across Media*”, “thus the circle comes to a close”. The circle, however, rose in ripeness, knowledge, experience. Above all, it has not come to a close but rather to a remarkable stage of excellence.

Such excellence stems not only from a meticulous analysis of every detail in the different works of art under close scrutiny, but is also supported by

proper theoretical references. Mention should also be made to the mastery intertwining of particular language specificities and other artistic devices with the historic and social ages they belong to, as well as to their conjunction and future perspectives, which help to improve a perceptive judgement upon art and its relationship with human life and human societies. Art proves to be both a source of pleasure and a powerful means to a better discernment of ourselves and of the world.

It was once my privilege to supervise Isabel Fernandes when she was doing her research work for her doctoral dissertation. Her PhD thesis was submitted under my responsibility. She has always worked with me as a researcher at the University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies — ULICES. She has now become my supervisor, for I have retired, though I remain one of the many researchers she is responsible for. It has always been a privilege to work with her. I feel rewarded when I think that somehow I have contributed to her intellectual development, her theoretical improvement, her refined critical reading. But as I did not actually supervise the writing of the first essay in this volume, it came to me as an entire surprise and a very good one. From that moment on I knew Isabel Fernandes is an exceptionally gifted scholar.

In the Introductory Note to this volume, the author lays out her choices, her criteria, and provides us with the necessary elements to fully enjoy this collection of essays. It works as a sort of guideline to the reader. One last word to underline that this is a book indeed worth reading, and to congratulate ourselves on the fact that so many valuable texts have now become available for the use of researchers, students and teachers.

Maria Helena de Paiva Correia

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Introductory Note

The reader will find gathered together in this volume a selection of articles and essays that have been separately published over the past three decades as a result of my teaching practice and research activity. Most of them are now unavailable elsewhere in printed form. Some were presented and/or originally written in Portuguese and had to be translated into English,¹ for the purpose of making them available to a wider audience. In chronological terms, they span a period from 1985 (when my essay on *Wuthering Heights* was published) until May 2008 (when my paper on *Girl with a Pearl Earring* was presented in Toronto).

These texts were chosen because they are considered to be representative of the type of work I usually do in my classes, undoubtedly as a result of my own academic background, based on a deliberate and specific form of approach to literary texts, my own choice of English authors and, lastly, my most recent interest in inter-art studies. Even though some of them may be slightly outdated (none of them were subjected to anything more than a formal revision and some very minor adaptations), I believe they may still be of use to university students, by suggesting different ways of approaching literary texts.

The opening chapter corresponds to an essay written in 1984 for inclusion in a volume dedicated to the memory of one of my university teachers,

¹ A word of thanks is due to John Elliott who translated two of the texts in the present volume: the one on Emily Brontë and the one on Bakhtin and Lawrence. Any fault to be found in them is, however, my responsibility, for I introduced some slight changes which may have impaired his excellent work. I would also like to thank Hanna Pietá for her invaluable help in preparing this text for publication and Inês Mateus for the final layout and the graphic design which she prepared with her usual care and devotion.

Professor Fernando de Mello Moser, at that time recently deceased, and it was one of the first things I ever produced in terms of scholarly papers. I remember the anguish of its birth pangs, but also the pleasure of its composition, once I had found my line of argument. It explores Emily Brontë's strange allegiances, and the tensions (between "form" and "content", between the narrators and the characters, etc.) to be found in her well-known novel. Somehow I tend to look back on that text as the starting point of my academic career...

This essay on *Wuthering Heights* is the first in a series of six chapters devoted to the English novel and the authors that have mostly occupied my attention: Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence. If Emily Brontë's poetry had been the subject of a minor thesis written in 1988 (Fernandes 1988b), then D. H. Lawrence's novels were the object of sustained study in my PhD dissertation of that same year (Fernandes 1988a). Like Jane Austen, Lawrence had been one of my favourite authors as a student and the choice to research into his novels arose from a wish to better understand what lay at the heart of his narratives and of his work as a whole. The two essays chosen for the present volume show the two sides of this interest: the Bakhtinian approach to *The Virgin and the Gipsy* highlights my interest in the compositional and linguistic aspects of the Lawrentian text, while the second one, exploring his poetry and essays, seeks to identify some relevant concepts concerning identity and otherness in his writing. In short, it looks at Lawrence as a poet-thinker, as someone who, in certain aspects, was ahead of his own time.

The two pieces on Jane Austen, likewise, explore two particular moments and two different dimensions of her work: by looking into her pervasive reliance on ironic forms of narrative construction in her novel *Emma*, the first of these texts draws attention to the writer's subtle but self-assured craftsmanship, while the article on her last novel, *Persuasion*, deals with her tension-ridden, but self-conscious and subtle dialogue with Romantic poetry, as well as her critical appraisal of Wordsworthian tenets.

The chapter on Joseph Conrad's short story, "Falk", corresponds to a period of my teaching activity when I was responsible for a one-year postgraduate seminar on this author. Having had to read all his work, I was intrigued and seduced by some of his short fiction and decided I had to write on this particularly grotesque piece. The result of my analysis confirmed my belief in Conrad as a master of prose narrative. It also gave me the opportunity

to deal with gender issues in his fiction (an interest I had been mulling over for some time) and to appreciate Conrad's peculiar way of critically reflecting on social questions.

These first six chapters reflect my long-standing involvement with the tradition of the English novel, my scrutiny of the structural and compositional devices used in each of the texts under analysis and my close reading habits. Moreover, they highlight a tendency to theoretically substantiate the arguments developed therein.

The seventh chapter, on Ted Hughes's poem "The Thought-Fox", presented at a one-day Conference organised by ULICES – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies in March 2007, entitled "Inter-art and Intercultural Dialogues", manifests both a particular concern and a belief of mine. It shows my continuing interest in the practice of reading (as an integral and decisive part of my teaching activity) and my belief that this should be viewed as a performative, dialogic activity, creatively responding to the creative injunction of the text as other. Readings in the field of ethical criticism were/are illuminating for this practice and its underlying presuppositions².

The last two chapters, one on a volume of short stories by A. S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories*, and the other taking as its starting point Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, emphasize and explore inter-art relationships. In the case of the first volume of stories, gender issues are also raised by the way in which through her characters (especially her female characters), Byatt identifies with and criticizes the French painter. The novelist salutes Matisse across various decades, acknowledging her reverence for his work, but also writing critically about him from her vantage point as a woman artist at the end of the 20th century.

"*Girl with a Pearl Earring: Narrating across Media*" explores the successive inter-semiotic transpositions that occur when a 21st-century novelist takes Johannes Vermeer's painting as a starting point for a novel, which in turn becomes the basis for a film. These transpositions or translations entail a series

² The work of Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature: a Very Short Introduction* (2004) was particularly important to me at this stage and this author was invited to take part in the before mentioned "Inter-art and Intercultural Dialogues" Conference of March 2007.

of hermeneutic and aesthetic procedures and decisions that are deeply dependent on the set of conventions that govern each specific sign system, thus inevitably creating a gap that evades faithfulness and precludes total equivalence.

I have called this book *Critical Dialogues: Reading English Literary Texts*, for I firmly believe in the value of literary criticism, understood as an interpretive enterprise, which is obviously dependent on the critic's "idioculture"³ and her or his own particular sensitivity, but also remains objectively aware of the text as a whole and of the way in which its parts cohere (right down to the tiniest stylistic and/or linguistic detail). I see this also as an exercise in interpreting the way in which a text is part of history: both the moment of its composition and the moment of its consumption. I do believe and hope that commenting on a text, in the various ways that I have demonstrated here, continues to be a valuable aid for all those who read: be they students of literature or members of the reading public in general.

³ Understood by Derek Attridge as a "unique configuration" in his *The Singularity of Literature* (2004: 21).

Emily Brontë after Strange Gods?⁴

⁴ This paper was first published in *Miscelânea de Estudos Dedicados a Fernando de Mello Moser* (1985). Ed. Comissão Científica do Departamento de Estudos Anglo-Americanos da FLUL. Lisboa: FLUL. 199-213. The present text has been translated into English by John Elliott.

Negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason (...).

John Keats (1817)

I

In the context of English literature, Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, has been justifiably linked with the work of writers such as William Blake⁵, Joseph Conrad⁶ and D. H. Lawrence⁷ because of the bold way in which it investigates the question of evil.⁸ This is a quest that, freeing itself of the moral, social and religious conventions of the times in which each of these writers lived, seeks to break the narrow constraints that govern and limit individual existence, calling them into question, going beyond them and, in this way, opening up a transcendent space (a "supermoral", as Georges Bataille (1957) says) in which the conventional oppositions cease to make sense as

⁵ See Bataille (1957).

⁶ See Ghent (1961).

⁷ See Klingopulos (1946-1947), Leavis (1969) or Langman (1967).

⁸ This term is used here in the sense given to it by Bataille (1957). It therefore refers to everything that is not susceptible to being assimilated by society, everything that is marginal to it, that does not contribute to, or even sabotages, the main objectives of socially organised life, including the most important of all these aspects: survival, and which, for these very reasons, is rejected by the social body.

mutually exclusive options. Instead of this, unity is established,⁹ and in this way the individual is freed to enjoy a plenitude of being.

It is in Blake and D. H. Lawrence that the aims of this programme are most clearly achieved: in the first case taking on the appearance of a mythical creation and a visionary experience; and, in the second case, adopting a mystical-religious pose. In an analogous, but less explicit sense, it is also what guides the work by Emily Brontë that is being analysed here.

Yet, since this work is a novel, the suggested starting point for clarifying the purpose of this article is the comparison of a passage taken from it with another passage originating from D. H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*.

My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath – a source of little visible delight, but necessary (...), I *am* Heathcliff (...). (Brontë 1972: 122)

Love is too human and little. I believe in something inhuman, of which love is only a little part. I believe what we must fulfil comes out of the unknown to us, and it is something infinitely more than love. It isn't so merely *human*. (Lawrence 1973: 493)

In both passages, two forms of love are compared: the conventional, mutable and perishable love, which is a source of delight, and the love-passion, an uncontrollable, subterranean energy, which imposes itself absolutely with the instinctive force of what is necessary, without the agreeable charm of something that is held dear. Whereas the first is associated with what, in nature, is transitory, the love-passion is linked to what, in nature, is essential ("the eternal rocks beneath") and in this way guarantees the individual's connection with the cosmos, the only way of gaining access to eternity. (Here is one of the cracks

⁹ Note how this aim is in keeping with one of the objectives of the philosophical and aesthetic programme of Romanticism in England: to assert the active reciprocity between the human soul and the universe and, in this way, underline the fact that man shares his life with nature in a mystical experience of communion with the living whole. There is a blurring of the boundaries between animate and inanimate, between subject and object. As Coleridge (1802) stated: in nature, "everything has a life of its own and... we are all *One Life*."

that these writers open in the doctrinal structure of Christianity and which, in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, is made explicit, for example, in the account that Cathy gives Nelly of a dream that she has had (Brontë 1972: 120-121)).

Although, in both passages, there is a clear recognition of two different forms of love, the positions of the characters who tell us about them are different. In the second case, it is Ursula, one of the central characters in Lawrence's novel, who ends up resolutely and unequivocally acknowledging the need for a relationship that goes beyond conventional love. In the first case, Catherine, the main character in the first generation of Emily Brontë's novel, reveals in this passage a much more divided and dilemmatic position; it becomes clear that she has in no way decided in her mind which path to follow.

The choice of passages drawn from the speech of these two characters is not an accidental one. Ursula has been justifiably pointed out as one of the characters in *Women in Love* who acts, in the text, as the author's mouthpiece. He himself would implicitly propose the central question through Birkin and Ursula and, through them too, would point out the path to be followed (which, it should be noted, nonetheless continues to be questioned and redefined throughout the novel).

In the same way, an attempt is made here to show that, in Emily Brontë's text, Catherine plays a similar role – proposing and addressing the fundamental problem of the novel, but never solving it definitively.

As far as we know, there have been very few critics who have explicitly recognised the centrality of this character, and even fewer who have actually identified her in some way with the book's author.¹⁰ Directing their attention and interest to the “immoral”, “abnormal”, “devilish”, “perverse” or “neurotic” aspects, many critics both from the nineteenth and the twentieth century, have explored in various senses the meaning and importance of Heathcliff as the hero of the work, thus deflecting our attention from Catherine and relegating her to a secondary position. Now, what I shall try to show here is that the framing of Heathcliff's importance in the work will only make sense if it is based on our understanding of Catherine and her role. I say this because, as

¹⁰ Curiously, Bataille was one of these critics; G. D. Klingopulos makes a similar consideration in the article that was mentioned earlier (Klingopulos 1946-1947).

was suggested earlier, of all the characters in the novel, Catherine is the one that is positioned most closely to its author.

It would, however, be convenient at this point to clarify the sense of this proximity between the two. It is not a question of the author identifying herself with the psychological profile of this character. As Q. D. Leavis proved in “A Fresh Approach to *Wuthering Heights*” (1969), Emily Brontë’s text reveals that its author, far from unconditionally admiring Catherine, leads us readers to recognise in this character many undesirable traits that she does, however, insist on justifying. But, nonetheless, the relevance of the psychological dimension for understanding the essential questions that are raised by the work seems to be fairly relative in nature. What is, therefore, at stake, is the positioning of this character in relation to the fundamental investigation that the text carries out. And it seems to me, in the final analysis, that it is with this positioning that the author identifies.

The most acute and pertinent problem that is raised by *Wuthering Heights* is therefore, in my estimation, that of detecting the author’s point of view (in the broad sense).¹¹ This being the case, what I am seeking to demonstrate here is that the structural and stylistic organisation of the work as a whole (which denounces the position of the author) points to or suggests a dilemma, a tension, a question that has yet to be solved, which in the text is acknowledged in a more acute and genuine way by Catherine (who, for this very reason, gains the tragic dimension that is normally associated with such a position).

This is what I shall attempt to prove in the following analysis.

¹¹ In order to make a distinction between what I have referred to here as “point of view in the broad sense” and “point of view in the narrow sense”, see Weimann (1962). Weimann draws a distinction between “point of view” (or point of view in the narrow sense) and what he calls “Erzählerstandpunkt” (or point of view in the broad sense). The first is always linked to a fictional narrator and is characterised by its “form of linguistic presentation, narrative technique and perspective”. The second is connected to the author-narrator and reveals “the attitude that characterises the social, ethical and psychic relationship that such author-narrator has towards reality as his subject-matter and towards the audience or reader”.

II

Before embarking on the analysis that I have proposed to make, I had best provide an explanation about the term “author” that has so far been used without having been properly specified.

When using such a term in part I of this article, I did not have in mind the concrete author, “the empirical and biographable individual”, with a moral and civil identity, “belonging to the sphere of everyday reality” (Coelho s/d: 93), but I was instead talking about the notion of “abstract author” or “implied author”, as it is defined by such theoreticians as Wolf Schmid (1973) (“abstrakter Autor”) or Wayne C. Booth (1961) (“implied author”).¹²

Even though, in my opinion, in the way in which he seeks to disentangle the notions of implied author, undramatised narrator and dramatised narrator, Wayne C. Booth creates a series of confusions that derive, above all, from the fact that he does not distinguish between the categories of “mode” and “voice” (Genette 1972), “narrator” and “focuser” (Bal 1977), he nonetheless has had the undeniable merit of drawing our attention to the frequently overlooked need, in all literary works, and in narrative texts in particular, to take into account that abstract instance that conveys an authorial point of view (which is not necessarily that of the real author, since this person “creates a superior version of himself, an *alter ego*, just as he creates his work”).

Wolf Schmid, in turn, defines his notion of an “abstract author” (which, in fact, he himself identifies as being in line with Booth’s notion) as follows:

The abstract author therefore allows himself to be defined as that principle that, in a work, permits the specific creation (and not otherwise) of the phonetic layer, the semantic layer and the layer of “objectivity” (“Gegenständlichkeiten”) that is represented, along with the aesthetic and hierarchical organisation of those layers in the global structure. (Schmid 1973: 24)

¹² For a more thorough approach to the question of the author in fiction, see Helena Carvalho Buescu *Em busca do autor perdido* (1998), where she discusses the centrality of the concept of author, in all its nuances. Unfortunately, even though I sensed the importance of this theoretical and critical issue in 1984, at the time I was preparing this essay, I could not benefit from Buescu’s excellent work.

From what these authors say, we can infer that the implied author is defined by the type of story chosen, by the type of narrator(s) and characters used, and their respective points of view, by the emotional or moral content of each piece of action and suffering on the part of these characters, by the use of symbols, by the choice of scenarios, by the sequence of scenes... In short, by the sum of the choices made both at the level of style and at the level of the work's narrative structure.

For that reason, it can be said that each separate literary work (even if written by the same author) "will always imply different versions, different ideal combinations of rules", or, in other words, it will define different versions of the same author.

It is crucial to recognise the importance of this literary category, especially if we believe that it is this, after all, that establishes the possibility of intuitively apprehending a work as a complete artistic whole.

If this is valid for all the narrative works, it is particularly relevant for a novel such as *Wuthering Heights*. It is significant that it was not until 1934 that the critical appreciation of the work began to find, with Lord David Cecil, "a coherent reading of the book's total meaning" (Allott 1970: 29).¹³ The difficulty displayed by the critics has to do with what many readers deplored at the time when the book first appeared, but which was to become so pleasing to the more recent (post-Jamesian) taste: the method used in its dramatic presentation, in which the author's gaze and voice are hidden, leaving no clear traces and handing the narrative stage to the dramatised narrators, and, through them, to the remaining characters.

It is known that such an attitude caused a tremendous disturbance at the time, as immediately demonstrated by the first reviews made of the book in 1847 and 1848. In a text that had such a bold moral tone and that was so violent in its delineation of both characters and scenarios, it was close to being

¹³ As Miriam Allott (1970) states, it is not a matter of uncritically accepting David Cecil's interpretation, many aspects of which are undoubtedly open to discussion, but rather it is a question of giving him some merit for having made such a decisive contribution towards ensuring that the critical appraisal of the book could begin to head in a more fruitful direction.

an insult not to seek to calm the reader down with the comfort of an explicit moral commentary! All the conjectures that thereafter began to be made about the author of the novel (for, curiously, many were convinced that such an aggressive and rough work could only have been written by a man) did nothing more than fuel biographical speculations that, for many years, disastrously diverted the attention of the public and critics alike towards aspects that were peripheral to the text and that were explored in more or less sensationalist tones. In this way, a misunderstanding took root about the novel and its author, immediately pointed out in 1850 by her sister Charlotte Brontë, which was to be the cause of much ambiguity and which was inextricably linked to the fact that attention was preferentially centred upon Heathcliff.

Taking into account the work's specific characteristics and the way in which it was received, it seems to me possible to state that the most urgent challenge placed before us by *Wuthering Heights* is in deciding whether or not we are capable of answering the question that has, after all, been an underlying one in all the critical inquiries that have been made about the text: What gaze is it that, *in the text*, sees nothing? What voice is it that, *in the text*, says nothing, but which sees and speaks through the way in which it selects, organises and structures the textual characteristics of the work as a whole? In other words, how do the narrative structure and style of *Wuthering Heights* inform us about its author's point of view?

In an article published in 1982, Mieke Bal and Aart Van Zoest skirt around this question without, however, answering it in a satisfactory manner. In a semiotic approach to the text, they seek to show that the structure of *Wuthering Heights* has an iconic relationship with its signified, or in other words that this structure *resembles* its global referent, but what they note is that, in the case of Emily Brontë's novel, we are faced with a specific form of structural iconicity, which they call anti-iconicity and which consists of a contradiction between the narrative structure and its referent. Seen from this point of view, the lack of correspondence between form and content, sensed by so many critics and readers, is not an arbitrary sign, but instead points to an anti-iconic relationship. The narrative structure (the signifier of this iconic sign) characterised by the containment and distancing that are displayed in its more distinctive phenomena – “l'emboîtement des récits”, “la structure desaxée en gradation descendante”, “la temporalité distanciante” – marks a clear

and undeniable contrast with the violence of its contents (the signified of this iconic sign).

It is in this contrast between what they call “le calme de la forme” and “la violence du contenu” that the structural anti-iconicity is to be found.

In the opinion of the authors of the article in question, the choice of this anti-iconic structure reveals or betrays “un désir de dire apparent avec un désir, plus caché, de taire”. The truth that the author seeks to externalise is therefore confessed or manifested with some hesitation, with some caution. (In this regard, I am not seeking to establish if the author did so consciously or unconsciously.)

In proposing this interpretation of the iconic phenomenon detected, Bal and Van Zoest skilfully fall into line with Georges Bataille’s reading of the novel, as described in his book *La littérature et le mal*, which underlies all the claims that they make about the work’s contents. Without ever questioning Bataille’s interpretation, they identify as a definitive truth of the novel the purpose of showing that an integral part of the human condition consists of the sovereign world of evil, of love-passion, embodied in Heathcliff (whom they consider, as one might have expected, to be “le véritable héros du roman”). This would then be the violent and dangerous truth that Emily Brontë wished to express (either deliberately or unwittingly), but that she felt the need to camouflage, given the conditions of her time, fundamentally through the tactical expedient of narrative distancing.

Not calling into question the fundamental steps followed in this semiotic analysis of the structural characteristics of the work, which basically seems to me to be stimulating and to have been carried out with a reasonable degree of success, I do, however, dispute the interpretation of the data obtained, which underlines the (conscious or unconscious) purpose of expressing the principle of evil as a desire felt by all human beings. Not wishing to call into question the legitimacy of such an inference, it does, however, seem to me that, as far as a global reading of the work is concerned, it turns out to be insufficient, for it ignores the idea of a *quest* underlying the characteristic that basically defines not only the narrated story, but also the organisation of the discourse that conveys it and the style that impregnates it – the conflicting bipartition. Through this, there is an exploration of the risks and potentialities of two opposing paths that subterraneously intersect at the heart of the individual

subject: one that drives man to adhere to the principles that rule and guide the social body and which is synonymous with survival, another that drives him to betray these principles and be guided by the non-human (easily slipping into *inhuman*) enjoyment of the fullness of the present moment, which is enough for his own purposes, and which, for that very reason, does not contemplate the death that is contained within it. It is through this conflicting bipartition, which affects both the structure and the texture of the novel, that the inquiring attitude that lies at its origin is insinuated.

In this sense, I underline in the text not so much the conflicting relationship existing between “le calme de la forme” and “la violence du contenu”, but the iconic relationship, into which, once again according to Bal and Van Zoest (1982: 321),¹⁴ this can be converted, and which links a conflict at the level of form to a conflict at the level of the denoted referent. In other words, the conflict between two worlds or two principles is not only represented at the level of the story, but also in the way in which the novel’s discourse intertwines the voice and vision of the narrators with the voice and vision of the characters, in a dialogic process in which what stands out most are the conflicts.

At this point, it clearly becomes necessary to revise the formal characteristics that define the narrative discourse, so that, based on each of them, and in each case underlining this guideline, one can attempt to arrive at the real position of the implied author.

If we take the three main characteristics of the novel’s structure as pointed out by Van Zoest and Bal, it isn’t difficult to understand them as being burdened with a balanced rather than an unbalanced tension. The first characteristic referred to is precisely “the disequilibrium of the story that is prolonged far beyond the event that could (should) bring it to an end, Cathy’s death”. Curiously, this characteristic, which in my view is one of the most significant, is not explored in the article in question, which is only concerned with the identity of the narrator-mediators (Nelly Dean and Mr. Lockwood) and the

¹⁴ In fact, in the article mentioned earlier, the following statement can be read: “si nous considérons en effet l’anti-icronicité structurale du roman comme un signe, elle relie ‘un conflit’ sur le plan de la forme à un conflit sur le plan du référent dénoté. Elle est donc elle-même un signe iconique” (Bal and Van Zoest 1982: 321).

nature of the actual process of mediation itself. For that reason, I believe that it should be the first one to be considered here.

If we understood that the most important structural characteristics would be placed, as a matter of priority, at the service of the tactical concealment of Emily Brontë's fundamental proposal, this would imply, amongst other things, that there was a need for us, at the level of our reading, to relegate the whole story of the second generation (which the authors of the article pejoratively describe as "douceureuse", "fade" and "l'idylle") to a secondary position, as if it were an excrescence that, above all, would make sense as something that either attenuated or cancelled out the excessive force of the passion of the first generation, of the sovereign world of *Wuthering Heights*, the world which would instead be the privileged theme and real interest of the author. Now, if we begin by noting the objective fact that, in the text, the story of the second generation occupies almost exactly the same amount of space as that of the first generation (160 pages for the first generation as opposed to 161 pages for the second generation),¹⁵ it seems to me to be highly questionable that it should be relegated to a secondary position in such a radical fashion.

In order therefore to explain what seems to me to be the relevance of this formal characteristic of the work, I shall make use of the rhetorical concept of "dispositio", which, according to Heinrich Lausberg, refers to "the choice and ordering of the parts that form the whole of the work". The first problem that arises in relation to this category is that of the internal division of the whole (the discourse or the work) into parts. According to Lausberg, there are two fundamental types of division: bipartition and tripartition. Let us listen to what the author has to say about bipartition (since this is the pertinent case for the work under analysis, basically formed from two parts, the first part containing the history of the generation represented by Catherine, Edgar and Heathcliff, and the second part relating to the next generation).¹⁶

¹⁵ In the 1972 edition published by Penguin Books.

¹⁶ The fact that the story of the first generation only comes to an end when the story of the second generation is also completed not only does not call into question the bipartition of the text, but it also strengthens the invitation to make a comparison between the two stories.

The bipartition of a whole heightens its tension. The two parts are in opposition to one another and are contained in the totality of the whole. The paradigmatic case for bipartition is antithesis. (Lausberg 1982: 97)

The very choice of a bipartite structure implicitly suggests a “tension”, an “opposition”, an “antithesis”. If the subject-matter of the work is, in fact, the conflict between the tempestuous world of Wuthering Heights and the calm world of Thrushcross Grange, the bipartition of the text into two generations who live this conflict or double calling in different ways and respond to it differently suggests, in my view, not the camouflaging of a decision or inclination on the part of the author in favour of one of them (according to Van Zoest and Bal, the first generation), but instead it produces a dilemma in textual terms. Or, in other words, this structural characteristic of the work should not be understood above all else as an anti-iconic sign serving a tactical purpose of dissimulation (attenuating or cancelling out the violence of the proposal contained in the first generation, which would, at the same time, be that of the author), but rather it is an iconic sign that would illustrate the tension between two antagonistic principles and would point to the author’s indecision or impossibility to opt exclusively for one of them.

In this sense, in her own division of her discourse, the implied author would display a divided or dilemmatic position that is, in fact, curiously shared by all the female characters in the novel. Nelly, Catherine, Cathy and Isabella, all occupy an intermediate position, constantly moving to and fro between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. Nelly does this literally, because of her role as a messenger, confidante and servant of the members of the two warring factions, constantly divided by her ties to them both. Isabella, voluntarily joining forces with Heathcliff and abandoning the grange, contrasts (precisely because of this mobility of hers) with her brother, Edgar Linton, who not only never abandons Thrushcross Grange, but also remains, from the beginning to the end of the story, the most faithful representative of the values upon which the social world is founded and which are opposed to the world represented by Wuthering Heights, of which Heathcliff is the paradigm. Similarly, Lockwood, after a first ironic attempt to identify with Heathcliff, which is thwarted before the eyes of the reader shortly after it is first made,

shows himself to be decisively on the side of Edgar Linton.¹⁷ Contrasting with the unequivocal positioning of these male figures is Cathy, the daughter of Catherine and Edgar, who, whether through analogies with the natural element or through the direct characterisation of both her physical and psychological profile, is constantly associated with members of the two different areas. But, of all the female characters, Catherine is the only one who lives through the dilemma in a tragic way. Literally torn between two worlds (and between the representatives of those two worlds),¹⁸ Catherine dies significantly *in the middle* of the text.

From the stylistic point of view, this bipartition is corroborated through recourse to two quite different patterns of images that characterise both the atmosphere and the central characters in each of the two stories.

As noted by Miriam Allott in her essay entitled “The Rejection of Heathcliff” (Allott 1970: 183-206), the story of the first generation is bound up with motifs and images that associate it with nature’s most violent, aggressive and destructive elements: “storm”, “wind”, “thunder”, “fire”, “rain”, “snow”, “rocks”, “cliffs”, etc. What in nature is barren and unproductive (and therefore irrecoverable in terms of human society), or filled with uncontrolled energy, is necessarily linked to the end, to destruction, to death. By the same token, the images recurrently used to characterise the emotional climate of Catherine and Heathcliff’s story are images of Winter, decadence or death, not to mention (now on a meta-natural level) the suggestions of Hell that many of those images contain either explicitly or implicitly.

The climate that is thus created, which dominates the story and the protagonists of the first generation, enveloping them until the very end, reveals their inadaptation in social terms.

Hence the need for sketching out an alternative solution through the exploration of a second generation, which symmetrically but contrastingly

¹⁷ Lockwood’s dream, in Chapter III, proves that the only possible identification is with Heathcliff’s most negative characteristics – his sadism and cruelty – which potentially exist in all civilised men, resulting from a repression of the more primary and instinctive aspects that link men to the natural elements. In this way, the dream therefore reveals how Lockwood is an entirely social specimen.

attempts to find a humanly more viable response. The group of characters from the first part – Catherine *Earnshaw* / *Heathcliff* / *Edgar Linton* – are to be matched in the second part by the triangle consisting of Catherine *Linton* / *Linton Heathcliff* / *Hareton Earnshaw*. Whereas the end of the story of the first generation ends up banishing the element Linton (the quintessential social being), the end of the story of the second generation will, in turn, eliminate the element Heathcliff (associated with all that is socially irrecoverable). The pattern of images reflects this exclusion, affirming in the multiple analogies that it explores the most positive, mildest and most agreeable aspects of nature. From darkness and shadows, we move to light (only temporarily clouded by the presence of Heathcliff), from Winter to Spring or Summer, from barrenness to fertility, from death to life, from Hell to Heaven.

But this is not the *final* proposal of the text, since this comes to an end by simultaneously closing the paths followed by both stories, inviting the reader to equate them and compare them for the last time.

As a second relevant structural characteristic, consideration must be given to the narrative framework achieved through the use of a narrator – Nelly Dean – an active participant in the narrated story, who relates it, thirty years after its beginning, to a first narrator – Mr. Lockwood – a curious observer who pays a casual visit to Wuthering Heights and becomes interested in the history of the two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons. It is this latter figure who addresses the reader,¹⁹ since it is to Mr. Lockwood that Nelly addresses her words.

On the one hand, as has been widely stated, such a narrative strategy can be understood as a way of lending credence to or guaranteeing the verisimilitude of the strange events and overpowering emotions that form the centre of the narrated story; on the other hand, however, instead of diminishing the strength of these (as would be expected through the predominant recourse to

¹⁸ In Chapter XV, on page 195, Catherine says: “You and Edgar have broken my heart, Heathcliff!”

¹⁹ The implied or abstract reader is defined, according to Wolf Schmid (1973), in parallel to the notion of the implied or abstract author, as “the personification of the receiving instance that is required and presupposed by the work”.

indirect speech, which normally characterises such a narrative mode), it heightens the tension and the differences between the narrators, Nelly and Lockwood, and the characters Catherine and Heathcliff. In fact, it is neither very common nor very plausible in relation to the homodiegetic narration to employ such a device as the one to be found in the dramatic presentation of characters and events that characterises the discourse of the narrators, especially that of Nelly Dean. These narrators constantly hand over the narration to other characters, as if limiting themselves to reporting what these people said, so that, in the text, their own discourse coexists alongside that of the other characters²⁰. In this way, we have an unexpected and sometimes disconcerting dialogue of voices²¹, from which the one that naturally stands out is that of the sensible, intelligent, sensitive, but limited Nelly, contrasting with that of the two lovers, excessive and uncontrolled, indifferent to normal rules and conventions.

The characteristic realism that is peculiar to this dramatic presentation thus enters into conflict with the distancing that is inherent in mediated narration; it highlights a certain artificiality in this form of narration, even running the risk in some passages of calling its plausibility into question (although never in a truly disastrous way).²² Yet, above all, this conflict once again creates tension between these two spaces, between two different realities, between two visions or two cultures. On the one hand, we have the genuinely prosaic voice of Nelly Dean, susceptible to social recognition, imbued with the particular serenity that comes from knowing in advance what is acceptable (by Lockwood, by the Victorian reader in general). On the other hand, we have the blind force of a discourse that is known to be socially irrecoverable, and that, in order to impose itself, can only count on the poetic energy of the language that it assumes.

²⁰ Besides the countless dialogues, note, for example, the insertion of Catherine's diary into Lockwood's narrative, and the insertion of Isabella's letter and Zillah's report into Nelly Dean's narrative.

²¹ See, for example, the dialogue between Catherine and Nelly in Chapter IX, pp. 117-123.

²² On this question, see Dobrée (1967).

In stylistic terms, the consequence of this contiguity of dissonant voices is the co-existence, throughout the novel, of two fundamental discourses: one linked to the characters that can be considered socially rooted; the other being linked to Catherine and Heathcliff. The first is a discourse of connectedness and is dominated by the logical relationship between its parts. It is organised horizontally: it frames, relates, explains, dissects, comments, censures. It is a logical discourse, which is aimed at rational judgement.

In contrast, the other is a discourse of interruption, emotive, full of absences, full of words that remain unexplained, unfinished. It bursts forth inexplicably and unexpectedly, and imposes itself through the poetic density into which it pours all its energies. It neither informs nor explains,²³ it exclaims. It is surprised by itself and repeats itself obsessively. It is directed towards the emotions, not towards the intellect.

In order to guarantee the effectiveness of the contrastive process, set in motion by this specific narrative framework, care has been taken to rigorously outline for the reader the profile of the narrators, a profile that is also placed in profound antithesis with that of the characters Catherine and Heathcliff. In the case of Lockwood, this is achieved, for example, by the way in which the sequence of the opening scenes is organised in the narrative. Such organisation subtly suggests to the reader the differences between Lockwood and Heathcliff, thereby contradicting the enforced identification initially proposed by the former. Heathcliff's lack of hospitality, witnessed and resented by Lockwood, will be matched by the cruel refusal of the latter to grant the request of the child that appears to him in the nightmare, begging to be let in. Heathcliff's justified violence is contrasted with the horror of Lockwood's gratuitous cruelty, rubbing the child's slender wrist against the broken window pane until it bleeds.

Also emotionally established through parallel and contrast is the difference

²³ In Chapter IX, for example, in the conversation with Nelly, Catherine not only ends up not recounting the first dream that she had had, but she also says that she doesn't know how to explain certain things that she feels or experiences. One should note the use of such phrases as: "I'll explain it; *I can't do it distinctly*" or "*I cannot express it*" (my italics).

between the two characters. The fear of love and emotions shown by Lockwood in Chapter I when he relates a thwarted amorous relationship stands in sharp contrast to Heathcliff's intensely passionate and painful anguish in calling out to Catherine's ghost a few pages further on, in Chapter III.

Despite inevitably agreeing with Lockwood's accusations of rudeness levelled against the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights, and Heathcliff in particular, the reader cannot however prevent himself from sympathising more with the latter than with Lockwood (at this precise moment in the narrative). In this way, he is immediately invited here to rid himself (at least temporarily) of the normal standards of judgement dictated by society (of which Lockwood is the representative) when considering the characters and events. Yet, since this is not absolutely the text's final proposal, in other words, because there is nothing in it that leads us to the radical and indiscriminate rejection of everything that emanates from the social world, the discourse of this narrator is interrupted and the word is handed to Nelly Dean, who, furthermore, will continue to be responsible for the narration until the end of the novel. Although she also represents the social world, Nelly does not position herself in relation to Heathcliff and Catherine in such a simplistically opposed fashion. There is opposition on her part, but the reader finds it difficult to devalue Nelly as a result of Catherine and Heathcliff's behaviour, and vice-versa. Normally what is suggested to the reader is a dual attitude. Nelly is devalued in terms of the standards defined by the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, but she does, at the same time, see her value enhanced in the light of socially determined moral standards, which do, however, transcend mere convention or prejudice.

Let us examine, for a moment, the most obvious differences between Nelly and Catherine. Nelly's essentially maternal character is matched by a certain insensitivity on the part of Catherine, who is incapable, for example, of showing any tenderness or dedication towards Hareton. All of Catherine's emotional energy is obsessively and irrationally directed towards her relationship with Heathcliff. Balanced and sensible, Nelly distributes tenderness and affection amongst the members of the two generations, especially when they are still children. However, Nelly is far too down-to-earth to understand the true dimension of the Catherine/Heathcliff affair. She herself recognises later on that she has made a mistake in misinterpreting and condemning

Catherine's attitudes, which seemed to her to be nothing more than the result of a capricious will:

Then the doctor had said that she would not bear crossing too much, she ought to have her own way; and it was nothing less than murder, in her eyes, for any one to presume to stand up and contradict her. (Brontë 1972:128)

Critically distancing herself from the points of view both of the doctor ("the doctor had said") and of Catherine ("in her eyes"), Nelly does not limit herself to telling us about them, but, through the use of ironic expressions such as "to have her own way" and "it was nothing less than murder", she suggests that Catherine has abusively taken advantage of the doctor's recommendation to give free rein to her whims. In this way, Nelly condemns and censures Catherine and, in the eyes of the reader, her later repentance (at the time of Catherine's final illness)²⁴ confirms Nelly's inability to understand what is happening with her, despite her sensibleness. At the same time, it generates in the reader a greater respect and even fascination for the depth of the feelings that are responsible for such extreme consequences. Yet, at the same time, Nelly's recognition of the mistake that she has made both at this and other points in the story, the fact that she is always ready to listen, to give advice, to support both Catherine and Heathcliff, even when she does not understand them, inevitably reinforces the reader's confidence in this character, obliging him to recognise and give greater value to what he finds in Nelly Dean but does not find in the lovers: the warmth of disinterested solidarity.

All the stylistic and structural characteristics that have been briefly analysed here underline the tense equilibrium that exists between characters, their respective points of view and positioning in relation to the social world. In my opinion, they ultimately underline the need to benefit from a dual perspective that guarantees that, at the end, the reader will not adopt the impoverished view of a Lockwood, of the type that is exclusively determined by rules and conventions artificially imposed by society, and that he will regard the Catherine/Heathcliff relationship with the excited curiosity of someone

²⁴ Nelly says: "I should not have spoken so, if I had known her true condition, but I could not get rid of the notion that she acted a part of her disorder" (Brontë 1972:159).

discovering the ins and outs of a fascinating love affair and death, a “worthy” subject of the “most interesting” and “entertaining” literature²⁵, but one which has nothing to do with the reader, who is immune to something similar.²⁶

III

Because no one is immune to such tempestuous and uncontrolled energy. One of the lessons of *Wuthering Heights*, clearly highlighted after all in the behaviour of all its characters, is precisely the recognition of the fact that the human condition partakes of evil.²⁷

And this is because man belongs to the universe. The analogical matrix of *Wuthering Heights*, as Mark Schorer (1949) noted, highlights this sense of belonging. The systematic use of a metaphorical language, through which human life is constantly assimilated to the life of the natural elements (fire, wind, water) and to animal life, blurs the frontiers between men and their context, which our culture has traditionally striven to underline, in order to transform them into parts that are inescapably integrated into a universal whole. And, if society, as it evolves, has an ever stronger tendency to counteract this trend of man towards complete consonance with the natural elements; if,

²⁵ As an illustration of this perspective of Lockwood’s, we have, for example, the following passage in Chapter X: “(...) I feel as if I could enjoy *something interesting*. Why not have up Mrs. Dean to finish her *tale*? I can recollect its chief incidents, as far as she had gone. Yes, I remember *her hero* had run off, and never been heard of for three years: and the *heroine* was married (...)” (Brontë 1972:130, my italics).

²⁶ Just as the name “Lockwood” suggests something that is enclosed, which excludes or shuts itself off from any external influence or principle.

²⁷ Either by acknowledging it entirely (as is the case with Heathcliff) or by rejecting it and repressing it, but not being able to prevent the wish for it from unexpectedly being revealed in dreams (as is the case with Lockwood), from insinuating itself in an ill-confessed form (as is the case with Isabella, in the letter that she writes) or from being poured out in a sudden fit of fury (as is the case with Edgar, when he fights with Heathcliff).

the greater its degree of development, the more sophisticated is its perspective of the universe from which it always tends to select, hierarchise or afford greater value to isolated aspects in accordance with the specific interests of its own internal organisation, then the need felt by artists to oppose it will consequently be all the more urgent. In this sense, Romanticism seems to have been a neuralgic moment in the affirmation of this opposition; and *Wuthering Heights* seems to have been one of the romantic works in which this assertion is most skilfully insinuated.

But, after all, what does the author of the novel show us?

First of all, through the story of the first generation (and its contrast with that of the second generation), she shows us that Heathcliff is of no use or value in social terms. Catherine states: "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff" (Brontë 1972: 121), and "if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars" (Brontë 1972: 122), or even, referring to him in the conversation that she has with Isabella, "an unreclaimed creature, without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone (...) He's not a rough diamond – a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic; he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man (...). I know he couldn't love a Linton; and yet, he'd be quite capable of marrying your fortune and expectations. Avarice is growing with him a besetting sin" (Brontë 1972: 141). This portrait is confirmed not only by Nelly Dean, ("Mrs. Linton spoke strongly, and yet, I can't contradict her" (Brontë 1972:142), but by the very novel itself as a whole. Catherine states, the author corroborates: Heathcliff is morally repugnant.

But what will the consequences be if Heathcliff (and what he represents) is excluded or annulled and replaced by a Linton? This is the second question that is raised, which the story of the two generations also seeks to answer. Through it, we understand that it is possible, and, in social and human terms, even desirable, for there to be a union between the Earnshaws and the Lintons, but that the price to be paid for this is the renunciation of *Wuthering Heights*. Just as Catherine Earnshaw, by marrying Edgar Linton, had to renounce the swamp land and her old house, so, in the same way, Hareton Earnshaw, by marrying Catherine Linton, abandons *Wuthering Heights* to go and live with her at Thrushcross Grange. This is, after all, the price of socialisation. And yet, while this renunciation fully satisfies Nelly Dean, it is not at all legitimate to state that it satisfies the author.

What do the geographical space and the house of Wuthering Heights represent?

Paradoxically placed on the top of a hill, it appears as an alternative to heaven. As has already been said, the associations that are made with Hell, devilish forces, death and Heathcliff, are multiple and insistent. In the eyes of Lockwood, Edgar, Isabella, Linton Heathcliff and Cathy Linton, and even, up to a certain point, in the eyes of Nelly Dean too (especially in the final phase), the house is infernal – an undesirable nightmare. From a social point of view, it is therefore regarded as a space of exile that keeps men away from those feelings and emotions that unite them and hold them firm to the social body. For Catherine, however, it is home, the original dwelling place. Exile, by contrast, is the paradisiacal valley of Thrushcross Grange, and her marriage to Edgar Linton.

As an alternative to the paradise of the valley where the Lintons live, Wuthering Heights represents the cosmic principles and aspects of human nature that society does not tolerate and which, for that reason, it hastens to label as infernal and to repress. Its lord and master is Heathcliff. To renounce Heathcliff is to renounce that dimension of nature and the human soul that transgresses and overflows beyond the limits that are artificially imposed by the socially organised life. Catherine Earnshaw, a descendant from an ancient line, does not resign herself to accepting that renunciation, but, realising that socially (in other words, based on the imperatives of her human existence that dictate that she should marry Edgar Linton) it is not possible for her to have a union with Heathcliff, she allows herself to die in order to realise that union in the afterlife.

The second generation proves that Catherine was right: her path through life shows that, in terms of human existence, any alliance with Heathcliff is pernicious. There is no possible reconciliation.

The reader is thus left to contend with a complex problem: if he adopts a rational point of view that is morally determined, he will find it impossible not to recognise the potentialities and virtues of the solution proposed by the second generation. If, however, he abandons criteria that are socially rooted, as the novel also teaches him to do right from the very beginning, he will recognise the insufficient nature of that solution and will inevitably feel dissatisfied to see the couple Cathy/Hareton leaving the sovereign space of

Wuthering Heights unreclaimed.

In its ambiguous and open ending, the novel reflects the dilemma of its author, which is, after all, the result of the position adopted by all true artists – that of existing in a time that their time excludes.

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Jane Austen's *Emma*: beyond Verbal Irony²⁸

²⁸ This paper was delivered at the inaugural conference of the Hellenic Association for the Study of English, Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-4 April 1993. The text printed here is based on the published version in *Logomachia. Forms of Opposition in English Language/Literature* (1994). Ed. E. Douka Kabitoglou. Thessaloniki: Hellenic Association for the Study of English. 311-319.

If one had to select a literary concept able of simultaneously raising up the greatest number of difficult and polemical theoretical assumptions, irony would, I think, immediately suggest itself to us.

The problem of the author and of authorial intentions, the possibility of literary communication and of an interpretive community are some of the issues necessarily involved in a perusal of the use of irony in literary texts.

However, I will not address the problem at this level of theoretical complexity here, but will simply proceed to a rapid overview of the way in which irony has been approached.

In the last decades one may speak of a tendency towards the echoic use of irony or its quotational nature more than its tropic character.²⁹ In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth (1975: 68), for instance, significantly criticizes and, to a certain extent, dismisses Quintilian on the grounds that: “Quintilian is wrong ... in distinguishing such an effect [i.e. clashes of style] as a *trope* — a mere verbal matter — from the true ‘figure of irony.’” Booth, on the other hand, stresses not so much irony as a verbal trope but what we would term, using a Bakhtinian adjective, the “dialogic” nature of irony. His summing-up of what he conceives to be the “essential structure” of irony appears, for instance, when he characterizes a very great portion of ironic essays as follows: “a) a plausible but false voice is presented; b) contradictions of this voice are introduced;

²⁹ See, for instance, issue number 36 of *Poétique* (1978), specifically on “Irony”, and in particular Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s essay, “Les ironies comme mentions” (1978). For a recent approach insisting on irony as echoic utterance see Blackmore (1992, especially 164-71).

c) a correct voice is finally heard, repudiating all or most or some of what the ostensible speaker has said” (Booth 1975: 62, note the repetition of the word “voice”).

I would like to stress that, from the point of view of someone mainly interested in the study of novelistic texts, this emphasis on an interplay of voices is much more productive in an analysis of narrative texts than the narrow, traditional concept of irony as a verbal trope or rhetorical figure “in which ... the meaning is contrary to the words” (Cuddon 1991: 458). Narrative syntax has shown itself to be more easily understandable in terms of an interplay of voices and this is why, in considering the work of an ironic novelist such as Jane Austen, the critics have long since laid great store upon her skilful use of free indirect speech — clearly a dialogic device very apt for accommodating irony. What is at stake in free indirect speech is the presence of identifiable sections of a character’s actual words and vision on the level of the narrator’s speech.³⁰ Free indirect style is perhaps the most obvious form of ironically orchestrating the narrator’s and the character’s utterances but it is one among others. Jane Austen, for instance, resorts to more subtle ways of intertwining voices/visions in her novels. Indeed, we also find there the double-accented hybrid construction — “an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages’, two semantic and axiological belief systems” (Bakhtin 1982: 304). In resorting to such dialogic devices, the novelist not only shows her indebtedness to the 18th century comic novelists, such as Fielding and Sterne, but in the suppleness and subtleness of her usage develops and diverts them to serve her own specific and very different aims.

I could easily illustrate what has just been said by quoting as much from *Emma*, as from any other of Austen’s novels. My present aim is different though, and I beg you to return to the conceptual approaches to irony introduced a while ago.

Our previous appraisals of irony either in its tropic or in its dialogic dimension are not contradictory, but rather they correspond to two different

³⁰ This is what Bakhtin (1982) terms “character zones” in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

approaches to irony on the same level — that of speech. In both cases we are dealing with verbal or rhetorical irony.

Given Booth's emphasis on communication and intentionality, he deprives us of a useful distinction made by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1976) between the varieties of irony that are not in any sense rhetorical and verbal irony itself.³¹ As Kerbrat-Orecchioni argues we should distinguish between being verbally ironic and verbalizing an ironic situation. In the latter case we have no verbal irony, no trope, but simply the presentation by means of words of an ironic situation. This is the basis for her distinction between practised irony and presented irony.

Now, in a novel, it can happen that the novelist may or may not choose to present ironically (verbal or practised irony) an ironic situation (situational, immanent or presented irony). Moreover, if he/she chooses simply to present ironic situations, he/she can adopt a more or less conspicuous form of presentation.

My argument here is that Jane Austen, in drawing the characters in her novel *Emma*, uses a kind of irony that is beyond verbal irony and that may be seen as a special kind of situational irony though in a sense slightly different from the one we usually ascribe to it.³² What is characteristic of it is that being a presented irony (and not a verbal one) it is not formally marked as irony at the level of speech but consists simply of the assimilation of apparently dissimilar elements with the aim of better dissociating them.

The use of this kind of ironic device is of a structural nature and (though verbally unmarked) affects our reading of the heroine's predicament, even if only at a subliminal level. Throughout the novel a significant pattern of unexpected similarities between the protagonist and the other characters helps to clarify the heroine's traits of personality and her shortcomings but simultaneously makes manifest how different (and potentially superior) she is to most of those surrounding her. Instead of the typical plot structure "around

³¹ See also Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980).

³² Cuddon (1991: 460): "Situational irony occurs when, for instance, a man is laughing uproariously at the misfortune of another even while the same misfortune, unbeknownst, is happening to him".

the contrasted characters of two or three young women” (Butler 1990: 122), in *Emma* we have a different sort of pairings and contrasts with an unquestioned sovereign heroine at the centre.

What I will try to show now is that the text as a whole and not simply at the surface level of speech is ironic in that its structural pattern is defined in terms essentially akin to the characteristic mechanisms of irony both in its strategy and in its structure — to approach in order better to contrast.³³ In this novel, virtually every character can be seen as a distorted replica or caricature of some of the heroine’s faults, even those characters that apparently have nothing in common with her. Instead of juxtaposing or overlapping contradictory meanings (as in trope) or different utterances and conflicting views (as in a double-accented hybrid construction) what is at stake here is to bring into unexpected contact apparently dissimilar characters and thus make their resemblances and their differences simultaneously apparent to the reader.

The first surprising instance occurs early in the novel when, in the very beginning, we are aware of a disquieting similarity between Emma and her “most affectionate, indulgent father”, Mr. Woodhouse. The novel begins immediately after Miss Taylor — the governess — has married Mr. Weston, a marriage Emma boasts of having promoted and which creates for her a situation of “intellectual solitude”. This she tries to overcome by devoting herself to Harriet Smith — “the natural daughter of somebody” and not a particularly bright or distinguished student pupil at Mrs. Goddard’s school — someone Emma is determined “to notice” and “to improve” and later find a husband for. Emma disposition to choose for others, to impose her own opinion, criteria, and will on them and so ignore their real needs and wishes is ironically reverberated in her father’s similar attitude to those who visit him at Hartfield:

³³ Linda Hutcheon (1978) argues that both parody and irony involve in their definition the structural use of contrast. At the end of her essay “Ironie et parodie: stratégie et structure” she writes: “si l’acte parodique est un acte de synthèse, sa fonction ou sa stratégie est, paradoxalement, celle d’une séparation, d’un contraste” (1978: 477). The same applies to irony. D. C. Muecke in his “Analyses de l’ironie” writes: “Une forme, peut-être la plus simple, d’opération ironique, consiste à juxtaposer temporellement ou spatialement des contenus opposés” (1978: 493).

Mr. Woodhouse was fond of society *in his own way*. He liked very much to have his friends come and see him; and from various united causes, from his long residence at Hartfield, and his good nature, from his fortune, his house, and his daughter, he could command the visits to *his own little circle*, in a great measure *as he liked*. He had not much intercourse with any families beyond that circle; his horror of late house and large dinner-parties made him unfit for any acquaintance, but such as would visit him *on his own terms*. (Austen 1981: 5, emphasis added)

This quotation makes evident Mr. Woodhouse's selfishness, a trait he shares with his daughter. Selfishness in the case of Emma derives from her having had "very little to distress or vex her" and from her "having too much her own way" (37). But whereas Emma's choices for others are as decisive and important as choosing a husband for Harriet, Mr. Woodhouse is content with far less risky and much more trivial choices. Always anxious about his guests' health he decides what they shall or shall not eat and the choice invariably falls back upon a "small basin of thin gruel as his own" (55)!

Mr. Woodhouse's total incapacity for taking into account anything that is outside his habits, his taste and his valetudinarian concerns, his lack of "talents" and sagacity contrast, however, with Emma's intelligence and with her unselfish attitude towards him. Though fanciful and somewhat spoiled herself, the protagonist shows such regard and tact in dealing with her father's whimsicalities that one cannot avoid recognizing here the mark of someone potentially able to deal with others and finally take their true needs and predicaments into account.

Mr. Woodhouse is one of the comic characters in this novel. Mrs. Elton and Miss Bates are also comic characters and, like the former, are defined by very few fixed traits (Butler 1990: 269). In this light, any parallel with the protagonist would appear improbable and yet this is precisely what happens.

Mrs. Elton, for instance, is an outsider to the Highbury circle, who unexpectedly appears as the wife of Mr. Elton, the vicar, giving herself airs of patronizing condescension. Mrs. Elton behaviour characteristically displays her own self-conceit that is out of keeping with her origins and with her true station in life. She regards the rest of the community as if she were its centre, meets Emma on equal terms, patronizes Jane Fairfax simply because she is poor and treats Mrs. Knightley with undue familiarity. These attitudes echo in

a conspicuous and exaggerated fashion some of the faults Emma betrays in her own social behaviour. Though truly occupying a socially superior position in Highbury (“[t]he Woodhouses were first in consequence here” [39]), a standing which entails some social obligations and duties (which she, nevertheless, sometimes neglects), Emma, like Mrs. Elton, often expects more than she deserves. Besides, Mrs. Elton’s arrogant haughtiness towards Jane Fairfax, her “resolution ... as to noticing [her]”, her decision to be “constantly on the watch for an eligible situation” (285), ironically mirrors similar decisions on Emma’s part towards Harriet. Moreover, like Emma, Mrs. Elton’s self-esteem is some points ahead of her accomplishments and both display a parallel tendency to underestimate the qualities of those surrounding them.

But despite all these apparent similarities they are very different indeed. Emma, unlike Mrs. Elton, is ready to recognise her own mistakes and thus is able to gradually become aware of her own shortcomings, whereas Mrs. Elton hopelessly believes she possesses qualities that in fact she lacks. Though, like Emma, she “wants to be wiser and wittier than all the world” (289), her wits amount to no more than a total lack of taste, of dignity and of intelligence. Emma, on the contrary, is clever and witty though she still lacks maturity and self-discipline to restrain and control her ingenious though hasty conjectures and her rash answers.

It is, however, in relation to Miss Bates that some of Emma’s most interesting characteristics are displayed. Miss Bates’s situation and attributes could not be further removed from the heroine’s:

She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. (52)

It is “her own universal good-will and contented temper” that is the mark of her inability to discern the faults and deficiencies in others. This sort of blindness (contrasting sharply with Emma’s penetrating wit) perfectly matches her simplicity and unpretentiousness: “I do not think I am particularly quick at those sort of discoveries” — she admits, adding: “What is before me I see”. This last sentence reverberates ironically on the protagonist because, for all her discernment, Emma is blind to “what is before” her: Mr. Elton’s attention’s

to herself, Jane and Frank's secret engagement and finally Mr. Knightley's love for her and hers for him.

Besides, both characters share a similar eagerness for news and both are, though in different ways, "talkers". Miss Bates's eagerness for news can be seen as a means of filling up a void in a dull, hopeless existence, which feeds vicariously on anything and everything she seizes upon. Thus, in her speech, we have a mangle-mangle of all types of information, feelings, polite formulas and impressions that she is unable to systematically dissociate and organize. For Emma, unexpected events or events of any kind — in a word, news — are a means of evading routine and a claustrophobic circle and thus answer to her need of a more lively and interesting mode of existence. Her restless spirit and fertile imagination need to be fed so as to enable her to open up new dimensions to the restricted sphere in which she moves and lives. Miss Bates values the more or less extraordinary or surprising news which, nevertheless, as a talker she levels and mixes up with minute, derisive facts of domestic routine. To Emma, any unexpected "piece of news" is a precious challenge to her immoderate imagination always ready "to take up a notion and run away with it".³⁴ Miss Bates talks as if she were endlessly crocheting words together, thus making trite what was unusual and potentially interesting. Emma, on the other hand, overvalues news and fancifully makes the most of them. As a talker she shows remarkable skill and energy with words, is extremely quick in argument and is particularly good at puns. Unlike Miss Bates, who loses track among the intricate entanglement of her own long, dull utterances, Emma skilfully masters her words; but whereas Miss Bates's faults amount to no more than involuntary, harmless or, at most, clumsy indiscretions, which nobody heeds, Emma's speeches have more damaging effects. While Miss Bates reveals little secrets unawares, Emma secretly weaves the most potentially dangerous and suspense ridden plots based on nothing but romantic improbabilities (contrived by her restless and eager spirit) — Jane's affair with Mr. Dixon (a married man), Mr. Elton's and Frank's love for Harriet, etc.

³⁴ The expression is self-critically used by Miss Bates on p. 189, but a similar one had already been applied to Emma on p. 153: "She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it".

As Miss Bates endlessly weaves words in an almost incomprehensible and for the most part irrelevant way, Emma endlessly imagines stories and creates heroines; though checked by contradictory signs and facts, she nevertheless again contrives new plots; even though the characters persist in escaping from her fictional control, still she insists on projecting upon them the golden light of “romance”.

Emma is always ready to quixotically transfer rapturous fictional elements and the habitual common places of sentimental literature into the world of her everyday experience with almost disastrous consequences. She adopts in general a playful, somewhat irresponsible attitude in her relationship with other people, whom she significantly views as “riddles” and in the same way she considers perplexing situations as “puzzles” — these she takes as challenges that her fanciful imagination capriciously tries to solve.

Emma in her role as fictionist suggests a last ironic caricature. More than any other of Austen’s heroines, she can be seen as a distorted replica of the novelist herself and as such she is a means of denouncing the shortcomings, the dangers and the falsity of several narrative conventions of the day. For indeed, and once again in Jane Austen’s career, this is a novel about the novel, about the snares and false paths that are open before the novelist and that he/she must shun.³⁵

It is also a novel “about telling and listening or even writing and reading” (Hardy 1979: 78) — letters, conversations, charades and rumours besiege the characters, especially Emma, and are a test for her: they can either be superficially and rashly interpreted, that is, misread, or they can reveal a deeper, not so obvious but true meaning. In order to read and to write proficiently, the novel argues, one has to be able to see into one’s own heart and then also to be aware of otherness and of surrounding reality. Like handwritings, the novel tells us, characters/persons may not be easily deciphered but they are finally decipherable.

³⁵ See Loraine Fletcher’s article “Emma: The Shadow Novelist” in which she explores the idea that: “the novel... offers a comic version of Austen as a novelist” (1992: 36).

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Jane Austen's Persuasion: Testing Language(s) or Wordsworth Revisited³⁶

³⁶ This paper was first delivered at *Primeira Jornada de Estudos Românticos – Shelley*, in Lisbon, 4 December, 1992. The text printed here is based on the published version in *Cadernos de Estudos Anglo-Americanos* 3 (1992): 41-52.

First of all, I would like to reassure you that this paper will not be yet another argument for or against Jane Austen as a romantic. Its object is simply to decipher and bring into focus some signs inside the text of Jane Austen's last novel, *Persuasion*, which point to its author's characteristic acute awareness of some of the most pertinent literary issues of her day.

As a reader of this novel I have sensed that at an implicit level the text is seriously taking into account, questioning and, in its own way, trying to answer some of the most important and pervasive literary questions in the Romantic period and, in particular, addressing them as they were formulated and expounded by William Wordsworth in his writings (especially in the *Preface*).

And yet this is no study in influence but simply an exercise in practical criticism or textual analysis relying on and availing itself of the intertextual quality inherent in the literary object before us.

In a well-known passage of the novel, explicit intertextual references are made and I suggest that we begin by looking at these as a means of opening up our inquiry:

(...) and having talked of poetry, the richness of the present age, and gone through a brief comparison of opinion as to the first-rate poets, trying to ascertain whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*, and moreover, how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced, he showed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other; he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that she ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry; and to say, that it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed

by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly. (Austen 1972: 121-122)

The poems by Scott and Byron referred to here are clearly a means of criticizing Captain Benwick's self-indulgent attitude and narcissistic way of reading but also of ironically looking at Anne Elliot's behaviour, for she, having adopted in the previous chapter a similar position in her relation to poetry, feels no qualms in giving corrective advice to Benwick. But, of course the episode also makes clear Anne's superiority to Captain Benwick – her ability to rationally and unsentimentally criticize herself and check her solipsistic tendencies and her own self-indulgent lapses. Moreover, the implications are greater for there emerges from this quotation a concept about poetry of this kind that is further substantiated and supported by Anne's previous use of "some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn" – namely that emotionally charged poetry such as this favours and is in itself a kind of evasion and withdrawal from the social world and from the commitments and troubles of interpersonal relationships.

But there is at least another sense in which this passage is relevant: even if obliquely, it calls our attention to what seems to me to be the embracing theme of the novel namely, the expression of subjective emotion. Immediately before the opening sentence of this quotation, the narrator had characterised Captain Benwick's temperament in terms which sound significantly reminiscent of Wordsworth. One reads:

(...) though shy, he did not seem reserved; it had rather the appearance of *feelings glad to burst their usual restraints*. (121, emphasis added)

We cannot help recognizing here the use of the same kind of metaphorical language that we find in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth 1978: 735) in its famous definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings".

M. H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1978), has called our attention to what he terms "metaphors of expression". He writes:

Repeatedly romantic predications about poetry, or about art in general, turn on a metaphor which, like "overflow", signifies the internal made external. (Abrams 1979:48)

I suggest that this “expressive ideal” of Romanticism was not left out of *Persuasion* and that it was taken up by Jane Austen as a serious challenge. Moreover, I think that she also made it her pressing goal to write a novel which would favour feeling over action and situation, thus taking into account another of Wordsworth's options.³⁷

In order to do this she had to create a new kind of heroine and a specifically original plot. As Tony Tanner (1986: 211) recognized, she wrote a novel that “is in effect a second novel” based, so to say, on the ruins of a first one whose happy ending was blocked by the negatives of the heroine's father and by the equally negative persuasive advice of her best friend and counsellor, Lady Russell. The heroine's final goal consists of being able to communicate to Captain Wentworth the constancy of her feelings for him and thus enable a final meeting but, in the meantime, Anne's ordeal will be precisely the opposite – “being repeatedly in the same circle” with Captain Wentworth, whom she believes to be intent on marrying Louisa Musgrove and whose true feelings towards her she hardly knows about – the protagonist has to learn to keep away from and out the way of other people and to silence and repress the onrushing of the powerful emotions from her heart; but as she does so, time and again in the novel, the text paradoxically affords the reader the possibility of intimately partaking of Anne's intense flux of emotions. By constantly resorting to Anne's point of view and by combining it with the use of free indirect speech the narrator allows us unprecedented contact with a new type of prose: one which accommodates a subjectively distorted perception of the world around Anne Elliot and which, at the same time, is curiously nervous, spasmodic and iterative. Let us look at a textual segment which instances these new narrative features and which significantly occurs at Anne's first meeting with Captain Wentworth, after eight years of painful separation:

Mary, very much gratified by this attention, was delighted to receive him [Captain Wentworth]; while a thousand feelings rushed on Anne, of which this was the most consoling, that it would soon be over. In two minutes after

³⁷ In the *Preface*, Wordsworth presents the subjects of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* in the following terms: “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (1978: 735).

Charles's preparation, the others appeared; they were in the drawing-room. Her eye half-met Captain Wentworth's; a bow a curtesy passed; she heard his voice – he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full – full of persons and voices – but a few minutes ended it. Charles shewed himself at the window, all was ready, their visitor had bowed and was gone; the Miss Musgroves were gone too, suddenly resolving to walk to the end of the village with the sportsmen: the room was cleared, and Anne might finish her breakfast as she could.

“It is over! It is over!” she repeated to herself again, and again in nervous gratitude. “The worst is over!”

Mary talked, but she could not attend. She had seen him. They had met. They had been once more in the same room!

Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less. Eight years, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into the distance and indistinctness! What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals, – all, all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past – how natural, how certain too! It included nearly a third part of her own life.

Alas! with all her reasonings, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing. (84-85)

The record of subjective, disconnected impressions, the eruption of disordered feelings, the way in which psychological time excels clock duration – these are some of the most outstanding traits emerging from the quotation. It is to the point to note how time plays an important part in this novel.³⁸ One would say that it relies on the juxtaposition of a time past with a present time and, in the event, no wonder memory is allotted a central role – Anne's otherwise unjustified disproportionate reactions, in passages like the one quoted above, should be seen against the backdrop of her past experiences and as a re-enactment of past emotions and all the more poignant and intense for that. In this process, memory is as important to the characters in this novel as it is to Wordsworth's idea of poetry.

³⁸ On the importance of time in this novel see also Tanner (1986) and Johnson (1988: 147).

The foregrounding of time, however, is part of a large pattern of oppositions running throughout the whole fabric of the text and shaping it – a pattern which is in keeping with the nature of the most pervasive of romantic metaphors – and which aptly works by means of the contrast of a double set of levels: outer vs. inner, surface vs. depth, appearance vs. reality. Time, in this novel, is in fact seen as a surface – responsible for the changes in nature and in the forms of social life, social behaviours and immediate interests.

What is shown in opposition to time's inherent superficiality is the unchanged and unchanging level of true, personal feelings – this level is not, however, easily accessible, for it is obscured by the social conditions and the several different codes that govern interpersonal relationships – paramount among these being language. It is indeed striking to see the degree to which language becomes a subject in this novel and how, at the same time, it is subjected to trial.³⁹ One should perhaps also bear in mind, at this point, that language was a capital issue to Wordsworth but it should be noted that the optimism inherent in the poet's "dream of communication" is not taken for granted by the novelist. On the contrary, Jane Austen shows herself intent in testing language in this novel – confronting its inevitable limits, insufficiencies and dangers as well as vindicating its centrality and need for human (and humane) life.

I shall now briefly refer to and, if possible, even more briefly analyse three episodes in the novel in which the questions so far raised can be seen at work in their narrative complexity and richness.

The first is the so-called "hazel-nut episode" in which Captain Wentworth tries to use language as a means of promoting self-deceit and thus postponing the recognition of his present true predicament as well as of the role played until now by wounded pride in his stubborn rejection of Anne Elliot. Besides, he also tries to persuade himself that what he now finds in Louisa Musgrove is genuine firmness.

The dialogue is between the latter and the navy officer but there is a third party involved, though unsuspected by both – Anne, who overhears

³⁹ Tony Tanner (1986) explores the way in which language becomes a crucial subject in this novel (see especially pp. 238-44).

their words. Frederick Wentworth resorts to allegory:

(...) let those who would be happy be firm. – Here is a nut,' said he, catching one down from an upper bough. "To exemplify, – a beautiful glossy nut, which, blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot any where. – This nut," he continued, with playful solemnity, – "while so many of its brethren have fallen and been trodden under foot, is still in possession of all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of." Then, returning to his former earnest tone: "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm. If Louisa Musgrove would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all her present powers of mind." (110)

The brief allegory put forward here, again emphasises the outer/inner or surface/depth opposition. The stress on the polished surface of the nut, without "a puncture" or "a weak spot", runs counter to the allegorist's intention, in that it denounces his misguided, shallow appraisal of the situation. So that, in spite of Wentworth's shortcomings as an allegorist, or precisely because of them, the episode makes sense for the novel as a whole in that it highlights the contradiction between the captain's transient faulty favouring of appearances and what the reader was taught so far by the text itself, namely, that surfaces of whatever kind are misleading screens, hiding the emotional truth at the heart of human beings.

The surface/depth opposition, however, is present at a compositional level – that of dialogue. A characteristic feature of this novel is the way in which dialogue exhibits what Howard S. Babb (1962: 227) termed "metaphoric indirection" thus calling attention to the fact that in such dialogues words have a "double target".⁴⁰ They have a surface value in that they are directed to the obvious listener (Louisa Musgrove, in this case), but, more important still, they carry a deep emotionally motivated value, only accessible to those emotionally involved (Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth).

But there is something else the reader also learns from this episode, which has to do with the use of language and calls attention to a meta-literary

⁴⁰ The expression is used by Tanner (1986) who also alludes to this new functioning of dialogues.

dimension implicit in this passage. In it a story is told in allegorical guise, although it is not so much the story that is told that is important. More crucial is the way in which the story-teller uses the story – How? As a means of expressing (even if indirectly) his own true feeling, we would answer, echoing Wordsworth's lesson. In fact, however, we have seen how Wentworth's telling of such a story was precisely the means of avoiding a serious reconsideration of his true emotional situation. I suggest that Jane Austen's irony goes farther than Wordsworth's confident belief in expressive language. She sees the telling of a story as a process of self-delusion and the story-teller as a liar. He tells *such* a story choosing *such* words because he wishes the story to justify himself. Yet the language that he uses tells a different story from the one intended.

The expected and apparently expressive use of language is surpassed and the discourse becomes a directive utterance whose object is the speaker himself – an egotistical use reminding us of the soliloquizing quality of much romantic poetry and the delusions and plights involved in such usage.⁴¹

And yet Jane Austen is also using language, she is also telling a story. Should we then presume that she somehow feels safe from such delusions lapses and dangers? Why? And how?

I shall try to answer these questions by looking at the central episode in *Persuasion*. It concerns Louisa's fall on the Cobb. Here it is made clear what was sensed before – that it will not be necessary to wait until Louisa's "November of life" but simply until a windy day "in the middle of November" to confirm the mistake in Wentworth's rash appraisal of her character. Her thoughtless whimsical stubbornness manifests the frailty of her character in contrast with Anne's own strength, which is clearly established by the active, leading role played by the heroine at this stage.

My aim here, though, is not to look into such reversals but rather to consider a different matter: as the chapter tests, so to say, every character involved by making them face an extreme situation – the possibility of Louisa's death – a different test is carried out at a less obvious level. Jane Austen is also

⁴¹ It is worth noting that Jane Austen would probably agree with Keats's criticism of what he terms "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime". In his criticism, Keats stresses the dramatic quality of the poet's attitude in accordance with the dramatic dimension of Austen's novels.

testing the way in which the novel is ready to accommodate such potentially pathetic and ecstatic events without succumbing to sentimentality, pathos or excessive expression. In other words, she is testing the peculiar aptness of novelistic language to find a balance capable of thwarting poetic rapture, which, as we have seen, is felt to be one-sided, partial and escapist. And here again *Persuasion* surprises us: for the first time in her career, the novelist resorts to the use of a point of view that is entirely alien to the world in which her characters move and live. “Workmen and boatmen”, as well as servants, if they were referred to in her previous novels, did so either as simple attributes to the landscape or as instruments to the main characters. Their voice and their point of view was never really heard or taken into account. But here, on view of a scene that threatens to be unbearably pathetic, the comic note, even if in passing, proves to be indispensable and indeed cogent:

By this time the report of the accident had spread among the workmen and boatmen about the Cobb, and many were collected near them, to be useful if wanted, at any rate, to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report. (131)

The contrast with the atmosphere previously created could not be more striking. Instead of sentimental and indulgent sympathy, what we have here is an intrusive slap in the face of the text that helps it redress the balance.

Just as it is Anne’s presence of mind that affords a way out of the imbroglio, so at the level of discourse the only way to counteract the threatening flux of excessive language is to juxtapose an entirely different view. This view generates the required distancing effect thus solving the emotional tension by breaking it.

It is as if Jane Austen, by resorting to this (for her) radical solution, were implicitly admitting that it is precisely the novel’s capacity for self-correction by means of an alternative vision, an alternative speech, that separates it from the romantic poetry of her day and hence turns it into a more apt vehicle for human experience.⁴²

⁴² For this reason the novel becomes “moral”, in the broad sense vindicated by D.H. Lawrence in his essays “Morality and the Novel” (1983a) and “Why the Novel Matters” (1983b).

The incident on the Cobb reveals or uncovers the true character of the figures involved, by making them act publicly; it establishes the uniqueness of Anne's own worth but still hushes up the constancy and depth of her feelings for Wentworth.

It will be by means of yet another indirect or "double-targeted" dialogue, this time between Anne and Captain Harville, that the heroine is finally able to "speak out". Once again we are confronted with an oblique dialogue since it involves an unrecognized listener – Wentworth – who, not being a participant, is however compelled to read in Anne's verbal interchanges with Captain Harville a deeper meaning than the one that is received by her direct interlocutor. It should be noted that Anne's argument is no mere rational speculation but something motivated from within. Her reaction in view of Captain Harville's complaint of Benwick's fickleness triggers her emotional commitment, though showing no trace of partiality. The objectivity of her reasoning is not endangered by it being informed of her own personal experience; on the contrary, it gains in vigour and conviction for being thus subjectively validated.

Appropriately the warmth and enthusiasm of her speech increases as she becomes aware of Wentworth as a listener, for she then realizes the double import of her words. For the first time in the novel one registers a character's speech marked by the perfect coincidence of thought and emotion:

"Oh!" cried Anne eagerly, "I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you, and by those who resemble you. God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow creatures. I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of every thing great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as – if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone." She could not immediately have uttered another sentence; her heart was too full, her breath too much oppressed. (238)

Anne's speech makes manifest some of her many qualities: the ability "to be carried out of herself" and adopt another's point of view; the way in which her reasoning and her vision of others and of the world incorporate her own

personal experience without being subjectivistic; on the other hand, her own emotional experiences – during the course of having been “recollected in tranquillity” – have become thoughts. Her answer is intelligent because it is felt.

In its intensity, Anne’s speech only bears comparison with Wentworth’s passionate letter. As the heroine, while addressing Captain Harville, was indirectly speaking to Wentworth, so the latter “while supposed to be writing only to Captain Benwick, (...) had been also addressing her!”

But here again a contrast should be noticed: Anne is able to speak out, to convey the depth and the range of her love indirectly, by means of others – she is telling about herself by talking about Fanny, Benwick and Louisa; this indirect, dramatic and impersonal communication is shown as supplanting the Captain’s expressive diction. Wentworth, relying mainly on the expressive faculty of language, writes a letter in which first person “I” is supreme. It is too personal to attain Anne’s at the same time intellectually and emotionally balanced level of speech.

At this point one should call attention to the striking similarity between the names Wentworth and Wordsworth, the difference between them suggesting that the former more than being a man of words is a man of action – as his clumsy attempt as an allegorist makes clear. Indeed, Frederick Wentworth – unlike William Wordsworth – is better in spontaneous action than in speech!

Notwithstanding man’s socially sanctioned power over the written word – ironically displayed in Sir Walter Elliott’s vain act of “insertion of the marriage in the volume of honour” – the relevant task of finding a new word, or a renewed relationship of the human heart to the word, is woman’s – it is Anne Elliot’s task at the end of *Persuasion*. And in this way, Anne can be seen as a subtle surrogate for the author – an author intent on finding the appropriate word for a new kind of novel, a more daring one, which could be described as a cry from the heart. Like Anne Elliot the novelist has to learn ways of hiding, silencing or at least checking the intensity of the feelings at the heart of the novel. But a contradictory task is imposed upon her: like her heroine, she must be ingenious enough to find the means of doing so without at the same time impairing or diminishing the genuine strength and dramatic truth of the “powerful feelings” that eloquently “flow over” from the pages of this most fascinating text.

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Bakhtin and Lawrence: a Possible Dialogue⁴³

⁴³ The original Portuguese version of this paper was first published in *Dedalus: Revista Portuguesa de Literatura Comparada* 3/4 (1993/94): 189-205. The paper was translated into English by John Elliott. I thank *Dedalus* for allowing its publication here.

Introduction

When I contemplate a whole human being who is situated outside and over against me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person. (AA 23)

In the situation that is projected here by Bakhtin, as a kind of “original scene”, a hallmark in the work of this author, what one notices is a primordial fiction that crystallises and, in a somewhat metaphorical way, brings about the encounter, or better still, the confrontation between the I and the other.

Two human beings who contemplate one another from a unique and specific situation, whose range of vision is unavoidably partial and who, in order to overcome this failing, need to alter their relative positions, since “merging into one” is impossible. Basically, what is postulated by this scene is the fact that perception cannot be reduced to one single point of view. We might formulate the question in other terms and, in keeping with Bakhtin’s paradoxical style, say that, in relation to the other, each observer has, so to speak, an “excess” of vision, since each of them sees of the other what he cannot

see of himself. In other words, he sees more than the other can see of himself.

Excessive or defective, excessive and defective, what is certain is that recognising this initial coordinate in the subject's position in relation to the real world implies recognising him as being "in situation", or, in other words, occupying a certain place at a certain time that is unique and unrepeatable and, in this sense, historical. It also implies recognising him as being dependent on the other, on the gaze or perspective of someone on the outside.

This framework therefore implies, either explicitly or implicitly, two dimensions: the more obvious one being the importance of the coordinates of space and time, and of history; the second one being the interdependence between the I and the other that is expressed in dialogism.

Whether touching on philosophical problems, talking to us about the novel in general or about particular writers, or reflecting upon aesthetics, Freudianism, Marxism or on questions of linguistics or the philosophy of language, these two dimensions will always be present in Bakhtin's work: dialogism and history.

Dialogism and History in the Novel

As far as the novel itself is concerned, dialogism will be used as a way of highlighting the opening up of the novel to life, of showing its "Galilean consciousness" of the world and language, thus decentering it from the ultimate and/or unique semantic intention that animates it. Dialogism helps us to recognise in the novel the stratification of language, opening cracks in the apparently homogeneous fabric of the narratorial discourse that compromise its continuity, causing languages and distinct ways of talking to coexist in controversial fashion, which are matched by a similar number of points of view.

But, according to Bakhtin, the aesthetic appreciation of the novel still includes as one of its integral parts the detection of the particular way in which, in a given text or set of texts (determined by the author, period or genre), the intersection of two series – time and space – is achieved. It is through the integration of these two series in the heart of the text that literature has been able, so to speak, to become aware of real historical time and space and of the genuine historical man. According to this, the *chronotope* is a literary category that expresses "the essential correlation of spatio-temporal relationships, such

as it has been assimilated by literature”, and Bakhtin postulates that the two series, space and time, are indivisible, inviting us to orientate our apprehension of any prose text in accordance with the particular way in which these two series are configured.

Analysis of “The Virgin and the Gipsy”

In the path that I intend to follow through D.H. Lawrence’s novella, *The Virgin and the Gipsy* (1976), I shall attempt to focus, in particular, on the way in which dialogism is achieved in this text, as well as on the characteristic form adopted by its chronotope.

The beginning of the narrative, with its eminently expository overtones, immediately confronts us with the antecedents of the action that really begins in Chapter II, and it does so in a way that we can rapidly identify as being the direct heir of the English comic novel, and, in particular, of Charles Dickens (the Dickens of *Little Dorrit*, for example). What we see is the appropriation by the narrator of someone else’s discourse. As characteristically happened in the English comic novel of the 18th and 19th centuries, the narrator supports himself on and makes full use of “common language”, in other words the language of “public opinion” or “common sense”, objectifying it, placing himself on the outside and refracting his own semantic intentions through his recourse to that same “public opinion” (always superficial and frequently hypocritical). According to Bakhtin, it is precisely “[a]gainst this same backdrop of the ‘common language’, of the impersonal, going opinion, [that] one can also isolate in the comic novel those [specific] parodic stylizations” (Holquist 1982: 302).

In the passage that I shall now quote and which opens the novella, it can be seen how, after having implicitly quoted the perspective of public opinion (in italics) regarding Mrs. Arthur Saywell’s impetuous abandonment of her home, husband and daughters, the narrator embarks upon a parodic stylisation of the biblical language (highlighted here in bold), placing it in dialogic proximity with his own direct discourse.

When the vicar’s wife went off with a *young and penniless man* the *scandal* knew no bounds. Her two little girls were only seven and nine years old respectively. And the vicar was *such a good husband*. True, his hair was grey. But his moustache was dark, he was handsome, and still full of furtive

passion for his *unrestrained* and beautiful wife.

Why did she go? Why did she burst away with such an *éclat* of revulsion, like a *touch of madness*?

Nobody gave any answer. Only the pious said she was a bad woman. While some of the good women kept silent. They knew.

The two little girls never knew. Wounded, they decided that it was because their mother found them negligible.

The ill wind that blows nobody any good swept away the vicarage family on its blast. Then lo and behold! The vicar, who was somewhat distinguished as an essayist and a controversialist, and whose case had aroused sympathy among the bookish men, received the living of Papplewick. **The Lord had tempered the wind of misfortune** with a rectorate in the north country. (VG 167)

Through the emphasis that has been given to this passage, an attempt is made to draw attention to what Bakhtin calls “hybrid constructions”, statements that, according to their grammatical and compositional indices, belong to just one speaker, but in which, in fact, there are two utterances, two ways of talking, two styles, two differentiated semantic and sociological perspectives. There is no formal boundary between these two utterances. Indeed, in this passage, the appropriation of someone else’s language or perspective is never explicitly assumed, not even through the use of inverted commas, as will be the case at other points in the text. The use of the question – “Why did she go?” – is ambiguous, and it may be read both as an expression of the narrator’s perplexity and as an index of a semi-direct discourse or free indirect speech, marking out a “zone” or a segment of a character, whose point of view would be camouflaged to some extent. The other person’s discourse is therefore formally hidden, but it is, despite everything, quite audible and identifiable by the reader. And, even more importantly, the critical distance adopted by the narrator in relation to it also becomes quite perceptible. Contextualising the “quotations” from public opinion, it can be said that the narrator’s discourse takes on a demystifying role. It denounces the tendency for common sense to take pleasure in the disgrace of others, distorting matters through exaggeration and exploring them melodramatically, at the same time as it unmasks the duplicity and hypocrisy of those that are guided by it, as is the case with the vicar, later the rector, Saywell.

The subject under consideration here is the flight of Mrs. Saywell, who has gone to live with a younger, penniless man, and it is as if the author has opened for the reader the doors of the social scene that is represented, leaving us to listen to the indignant comments of the neighbours, the rector's lamentations and unedifying self-commiseration, the judgements of the pious women, at the same time as the narrator, because of the way in which he has appropriated these comments and relates to them, reveals to us his position in a refracted and indirect way, marked by a certain critical distance. In short, we are put in touch with heteroglossia.

On the other hand, the parodic stylisation of the biblical discourse (the Bible is an important element in the Lawrencian intertext in general) in the second part of the quotation and the ironic cohabitation of the biblical style with the narrator's naturalistic prose denounce the pettiness of the values, the narrowness of the horizons and the limited nature of the objectives of the middle class to which the Saywell family belongs. The betrayal inflicted upon the vicar by his wife is made to correspond to the trials and tribulations of the Jewish people in the desert, and "a rectorate in the north country" is transformed into a reward that is comparable with the Promised Land. In other words, social ascension and prestige are shown as the values that are most highly coveted by the rector and his family.

After this comes the presentation of the characters who will inhabit the diegetic universe and, more precisely, those who will occupy the domestic sphere, the family home at the rectory in Papplewick: the rector, Uncle Fred, Aunt Cissie and, most important of all, Granny.

They called her the Mater. She was one of those physically vulgar, clever old bodies who had got her own way all her life by buttering the weaknesses of her men-folk. Very quickly she took her cue. The rector still "loved" his delinquent wife, and would "love her" till he died. Therefore hush! The rector's feeling was sacred. In his heart was enshrined the pure girl he had wedded and worshipped.

Out in the evil world, at the same time, there wandered a disreputable woman who had betrayed the rector and abandoned his little children. She was now yoked to a young and despicable man, who no doubt would bring her the degradation she deserved. Let this be clearly understood, and then hush! For in the pure loftiness of the rector's heart still bloomed the white

snow-flower of his young bride. This white snow-flower did not wither. That other creature, who had gone off with that despicable young man, was none of his affair. (VG 168)

The centrality and protective status of this character within the bosom of the family are illustrated by the epithet by which she is henceforth designated – “the Mater”. The resonances of this name in Christian imagery must inevitably be invoked and taken into account here – the *Magna Mater* or the *Mater Dolorosa* is the Virgin Mary, the immaculate mother of Christ the sufferer, who with his own pain and anguish on the cross expiated the evil of mankind. In this way, through a series of ironic reverberations, the rector and his suffering are compared to the figure of Christ crucified – another unexpected and hyperbolic contiguity, whereas the principle of evil is indelibly associated with his wife. It is interesting to note the series of unexpected and significant inversions that are to be found in this passage. From the narrator’s point of view, Granny, now referred to as the Mater, is paradoxically reduced to the dimensions of an “old body”, described as “physically vulgar” but “clever”. Cleverness becomes the attribute of an object – the “old body” – and it is precisely through cleverness that the character gains the upper hand. It is such cleverness that, in this passage, dictates another remarkable inversion, this time seen from Granny’s point of view: instead of her being herself the immaculate mother, she “sacrifices” this status, which her very epithet would justify, in order to attribute it (surprisingly) to her daughter-in-law, or rather to the image of the daughter-in-law that she wishes her son to retain in his memory, in order, through the rector’s fidelity to a myth, to guarantee that he will not remarry and will thus remain forever dependent upon her. In order to do this, she has to “crucify” (or divide into two) the image of the daughter-in-law: on the one hand, she is “the pure white snow-flower of his young bride” (VG 168); on the other hand, she is “that other creature”, a “disreputable woman” (VG 168). The virginal image of the former is “sacred” and “enshrined”, while the latter, associated with the principle of evil (the “evil world”), is anathematised, banished from paradise. i.e. banished from the domestic “paradise” or family circle. This can now be seen as a temple whose object of worship coincides with the virginal image of the former of these two women. In the “sacred” space of the family dominated by the mythical time of

memory (in contrast to the chronological time and profane space of the outer world), it is necessary for the voice of the second woman to be silenced once and for all: "Therefore hush!" (VG 168).

We thus have, on the one hand, "self-sanctification" and, on the other hand, "unmentionability". This is what is reaffirmed in the next passage to be quoted:

The Mater, who had been somewhat diminished and insignificant as a widow in a small house, now climbed into the chief arm-chair in the rectory, and planted her old bulk firmly again. She was not going to be dethroned. Astutely she gave a sigh of homage to *the rector's fidelity to the pure white snow-flower*, while she pretended to disapprove. In sly reverence for her son's great love, she spoke no word against *that nettle which flourished in the evil world, and which had once been called Mrs Arthur Saywell*. Now, thank heaven, having married again, she was no more Mrs Arthur Saywell. No woman bore the rector's name. *The pure white snow-flower bloomed in perpetuum, without nomenclature*. The family even thought of her as She-who-was Cynthia. (VG 168-169, emphasis added)

Besides our continuing to hear two voices, two distinct points of view, that of the narrator and that of the grandmother (in italics), what stands out in this excerpt is the way in which it embryonically suggests to us the construction and characterisation of the chronotope of this work. Immediately, we have to distinguish two levels: on the one hand, the chronotope constructed "from within", from the grandmother's point of view and, by extension, from that of the family; on the other hand, the chronotope constructed "from without", by the narrator, which is superimposed on or coexists dialogically with the former.

In the first model, we have, as we have seen, a sanctified inner space in which the minister is not, as would be expected, the rector, but is instead the grandmother who usurps his place: "Now she climbed into the chief arm-chair in the rectory and planted her old bulk firmly again. She was not going to be dethroned." This is a hierarchically organised space, but it is an inverted hierarchy, at the top of which is the Mater. The object of worship is "the pure white snow-flower" and the supreme value represented by this is virginity – immediately associated thematically with the weakness of the immature and dependent man: the rector. The time is mythical and static: "the pure white

snow-flower bloomed *in perpetuum*.” The outer world is dominated by evil, by danger, and its time is that of the contingency of her “having married again”. The outer world is therefore felt as a threat.

For in the family there was a whole tradition of “loyalty”; loyalty to one another, and especially to the Mater. The Mater, of course, was the pivot of the family. The family was her own extended ego. Naturally she covered it with her power. And her sons and daughters, being weak and disintegrated, naturally were loyal. Outside the family, what was there for them but danger and insult and ignominy? Had not the rector experienced it, in his marriage? So now, caution! Caution and loyalty, fronting the world! Let there be as much hate and friction *inside* the family, as you like. To the outer world, a stubborn fence of unison. (VG 171)

The denunciation of the hypocrisy of this enclosed family space, given by the narrator’s embedded speech – “Let there be as much hate and friction *inside* the family, as you like.” – is compounded, through the use of what Bakhtin calls “pseudo-objective motivation” (also a feature of the English comic novel), by the denunciation of an artificial situation, one that is *contre-nature*. Although all the grammatical and compositional indices point to the fact that the adverbs and adverbial expressions, such as “naturally” and “of course”, are the narrator’s responsibility, and that he is apparently in sympathy with this motivation, the truth is that only from the point of view of the Mater and the children dominated by her is it logical, obvious and natural: i) to accept her as the undisputed centre of the family; and ii) to allow oneself to be completely dominated by her power. Only the weakness and cowardliness of the children makes such a situation possible. Thus, when we read “The Mater, *of course*, was the pivot of the family” and “*Naturally* she covered it with her power”, the adverbs become divorced from the narrator’s perspective, gain their own emphasis, an alien sonority, and refract the narrator’s semantic intentions. It is as if he were indirectly alerting us to the fact that this is an unacceptable and degrading situation, thus contradicting the apparent surface meaning.

But, as in the earlier English comic novel, the author does not manage to do without the direct and unequivocal intervention of the narrator’s words and point of view. With the result that, together with the parodic stylisation, the hybrid constructions, the “zones” of the characters, the pseudo-objective

motivation, we have segments of text, of varying degrees of length, which can be more or less isolated from the zones pervaded by heteroglossia and dialogisation, in which the narrator emerges and offers himself to us without any refraction.

It is through the narrator's direct interventions that, from the outset, we find ourselves learning to contrast this sacralised image of the space-time of the family circle with another quite diverse image that allows us to see this space as a negative reality, one of stagnation and death ("there was (...) a complete stability, in which one could perish safely"), which is in no way absolved from the chronological or separate temporality of the world. This is a cold and ugly place, closed in upon itself, claustrophobic and slowly degenerating. A space that contrasts in every way with the memories that the rector's daughters retain of the old house in the south of the country where they had lived with their mother, with whom they associate sunlight, movement, colour, brilliance, but also the danger and selfishness that are peculiar to wild animals ("the peculiarly *dangerous* sort of selfishness, like lions and tigers" (VG 170)). It is precisely by resorting to Yvette and Lucille's point of view that the narrator corroborates and confirms his denunciation of this enclosed space. Using the artifice of the figural narrative situation, or reflectorisation (the term used by F.K. Stanzel (1984)), i.e. a "vision with" (in the terminology of Jean Pouillon (1946)) – which is, after all, a kind of dialogism – the narrator succeeds in achieving something that will be essential in the construction of the text – namely that the reader gradually draws closer to Yvette, whose inwardness, from Chapter II onwards, will be a continued focal point for the narrative. And both the inward focusing and the "vision with" are effective means of regulating the reader's sympathy.

In the passage transcribed below, the perspective is largely that of Yvette and Lucille, although the voice is that of the narrator. As is characteristic of this author, however, the narration is not exhausted in the transmission of another's point of view, but is geared towards a dialogue between this point of view and a gaze that goes a little further, that is "excessive" in relation to that of the characters. In other words, the characters, were they afforded access to direct speech, would not manage to achieve such a complete denunciation as the one that is provided by this passage, but, on the other hand, the narrator needs to borrow some words, emphases and comments that are typical of the characters'

discourses in order to consummate his denunciation in a fashion that is convincing for the reader:

The rectory struck a chill into their hearts as they entered. It seemed ugly, and almost sordid, with the dank air of that middle-class, degenerated comfort which has ceased to be comfortable and has turned stuffy, unclean. The hard, stone house struck the girls as being unclean, they could not have said why. The shabby furniture seemed somehow sordid, nothing was fresh. Even the food at meals had that awful dreary sordidness which is so repulsive to a young thing coming from abroad. Roast beef and wet cabbage, cold mutton and mashed potatoes, sour pickles, inexcusable puddings. (VG 173)

Besides marking out important semantic fields or areas, such as ugliness, sordidness, enclosure or seclusion, dampness, coldness and rottenness and corruption, there is, in this passage, the suggestion of a metonymic role played by the house occupied by the Saywell family and the domestic and family space. These function as metonyms of the middle class, the bourgeoisie, and, by extension, the “status quo”, the “establishment”, which Lawrence took pleasure in continuously deriding both in fiction and poetry. This is what happens in his poem “The Middle Classes”:

The middle classes
are sunless.

They have only two measures:
mankind and money,
they have utterly no reference to the sun.

As soon as you let *people* be your measure
you are middle-class and essentially non-existent.

Because, if the middle classes had no poorer people to be superior to
They would themselves at once collapse into nullity.
And if they had no upper classes either, to be inferior to,
they wouldn't suddenly become themselves aristocratic,
they'd become nothing.

For their middleliness is only an unreality separating two realities.

No sun, no earth,
nothing that transcends the bourgeois middlingness,
the middle classes are more meaningless
than paper money when the bank is broke. (CL 527-528)

The break with the sun (“the middle classes are sunless”), the symbol of life, points to the bourgeois as someone who, having lost the vital connection with the cosmos and with the deepest part of himself that connects him to it, and having lost the courage to recover that connection, turns into a slave of the hierarchy and social conventions, money and material possessions, and, through them, enslaves others. By reducing his human condition to the dimensions of an attitude, of an appearance intended for his own consumption and for the consumption of others, he transforms himself into someone who, out of fear and cowardice, disbelieves in life – is a “life unbeliever”.

The rector adored Yvette, and spoiled her with doting fondness; as much as to say: am I not a soft-hearted, indulgent old boy! He liked to have this opinion of himself, and the Mater knew his weaknesses to a hair’s breadth. She knew them, and she traded on them by turning them into decorations for him, for his character. He wanted, in his own eyes, to have a fascinating character, as women want to have fascinating dresses. (VG 170)

The importance of the attitudes or behaviours that are assumed and their comparison with clothes is something that will be developed in the text in order to better characterise the conventional space – “personalities” and “dresses” are turned, so to speak, into surfaces that, by recovering and covering up the profound truth of the individual, isolate him and protect him from himself and from alterity (of others and of the cosmos), “defending” him from a contact that is too painful. It is as if those who are inside the socialised circle allow themselves to be literally and metaphorically *smothered* by their clothes:

The two girls wore their coats with fur collars turned up, and little *chic* hats pulled down over their ears. Tall, slender, fresh-faced. Naïve, yet confident, too confident, in their school-girlish arrogance, they were so terribly English. They seemed so free, and were as a matter of fact so tangled and tied up, inside themselves. They seemed so dashing and unconventional, and were really so conventional, so, as it were, shut up indoors inside themselves. (VG 173)

“Shut up indoors inside themselves” – this last phrase, while suggesting the starting position of these two characters, also anticipates the appearance in the text of motifs that are semantically associated with it and that help to define the coordinates of Yvette’s personal journey. I am referring to the motif of the

windows, doors and mirrors, which realises the chronotope of the *threshold* that is, according to Bakhtin, the chronotope of a crisis, a sudden change, a decision that will alter the rest of one's existence. The chronotope of the *threshold*, which is thus symbolically realised, helps to draw a pattern or structure that informs the work and which consists in the opposition between a closed and negative world and an open and positive world, just as it will guide the path of learning of the female protagonist, who will have to show herself capable of passing from the one world to the other.

The windows, doors and mirrors belong to what begins to be felt by Yvette as the unreality of life at the rectory of Papplewick and symbolically embody the challenge that she will have to respond to. She will have to prove herself capable of opening the doors wide, opening the windows and leaping through them, breaking the mirrors (or, in another realisation of the chronotope of the *threshold*, knocking down the walls of the "temple"). Only in this way will she be able to gain access to the outer world, to the natural, strange and unknown world – to the real world.

In order to gain access to this space, she will need to distance herself from "the mud and dark and dampness of the valley" where the "cold stone house" of the rectory cowers and, in this way, climb up, up (the metaphor of orientation, with its inherent idea of an improvement, suggests the passage from a lower negative level to an upper positive level), forever upwards towards the "naked summits" of the top of the hills where the gipsy camp is situated and where she has her first meeting with the gipsy.

They were on the top of the world, now, on the back of the fist. It was naked, too, as the back of your fist, high under heaven, and dull, heavy green. (VG 184)

In contrast to the socialised scene, the natural scene is naked, without any adornments, without any protection, at the mercy of the cosmic forces.

But if, in the new dimension that is introduced, we were expecting to find an open and sovereign space, adjacent to the sun and continuous with the sky, what surprises us is the divisions imposed by the dry-stone walls and the indelible marks of man's intervention in nature:

Only it was veined with a network of old stone walls, dividing the fields, and broken here and there with ruins of old lead-mines and works. A sparse

stone farm bristled with six naked sharp trees. In the distance was a patch of smoky grey stone, a hamlet. In some fields grey, dark sheep fed silently, sombrelly. But there was not a sound nor a movement. It was the roof of England, stony and arid as any roof. Beyond, below, were the shires. (VG 184)

The description becomes clearly dysphoric and culminates in the identification and reduction of this upper space to the dimension of a *roof*: “It was the roof of England, stony and arid as any roof” – a simple roof, no more than that! A roof that transforms England into a mere *house*, a roof that, after all, covers all the characters without exception, including the gipsy.

This means that the definition of the text’s chronotopical oppositions begins to become rather complicated. It is not simply a question of contrasting a negative, artificial and closed space, imprisoned in the fragmentation of temporal contingency, with a positive, natural and open space, dominated by an indivisible, cyclical time, but of recognising disturbing similarities and points of contact between the two.

A superficial reading of the text would be content with just detecting and drawing a simple (and virtually endless) paradigm of oppositions:

Socialised Space	Natural Space
Chronological Time	Cyclical Time
Christian	pagan
closed	open
negative	positive
sick	healthy
degenerate	regenerating
clean	dirty
imprisoned	free
limitative	liberating
safe	dangerous
predictable	unpredictable
verbal language	body language
verbal expertise	linguistic incompetence
isolation	contact
slave	free

base born	born free
tame	wild
humble	proud
cowardly	brave

Even though such a paradigm is acceptable and legitimate – as can be proved by the text – it does not, however, reveal the full complexity of this work.

In fact, together with the construction of this paradigm of oppositions, which is inescapable, the text simultaneously triggers a mechanism that has a completely opposite sign. In this case, we are, therefore, faced with a paradoxical and dual movement of creation and destruction: the text creates a symbolic dimension and configures a certain chronotope in accordance with this, while, at the same time, it destroys, or rather it subtly and sometimes subliminally undermines, the symbolic order that it constructs (through description and naturalistic notation).

On the one hand, we are led, along with Yvette, to see the gipsy and the space-time that corresponds to him as “the real thing” (in contrast with the unreality of the social circle in which she moves) – as what Yvette aspires to, as we do too, through our empathy with her; on the other hand, the illusory nature or, at least, the precariousness of that path is made immediately obvious implicitly, if not explicitly, (albeit in a somewhat diffuse fashion), and seemingly it is closely and parasitically linked to the image of the gipsy and his world. This is what I shall try to prove next.

As the “quester heroine”, Yvette is involved in a learning plot that is characteristic of the novella. What does her learning consist of? She has to learn to distinguish reality from unreality, she has to learn to go beyond verbal language and accept the use of body language (a lawrencian version of Wordsworth’s “natural language”), she has to prove herself capable of freeing herself from the false and outmoded values that they seek to impose on her.

This learning process is consummated in two ways: firstly, through a series of confrontations with a group of situations and characters that she has to learn to live with and which she has to be capable of critically assessing (even if she doesn’t do so consciously). This is what leads her to recognise the vengeful meanness of the frustrated Aunt Cissie, the cowardice and vacuity of her father and the *blind* totalitarianism of the power of convention and

tradition that is both held and represented by the grandmother. We also recognise the irrelevance and senselessness of the puerile escapades of the group of young people that she belongs to, the acknowledgement of the significance of money and material goods in the world in which she moves, and, finally, a certain mistrust as to the type of rebellion that is waged against social conventions by the Eastwood couple, and which proves to be illusory.

Secondly and concomitantly, Yvette seeks support in the alternative apprehension of something that she considers more authentic, more profound and satisfying, an alternative apprehension that she gains access to through her contacts with the gipsy. Being constantly invited to share the point of view of the female protagonist, the reader is surreptitiously drawn to participate as an accomplice in the process of symbolic elevation or deepening that the gipsy is subjected to and which gradually transforms him into a repository of positive values. These values embody the alternative to the world of the rectory, thereby fundamentally emphasising within him courage, sensual vitality and a physical and phallic awareness that is expressed in the form of genuine erotic desire.

Yvette (and, with her, the reader) contemplates the gipsy, and the look that she receives from him in return is transformed into a vehicle of self-recognition – the acknowledgement of a physical and sensual dimension within herself that, until then, had lain dormant. (He is Prince Charming and she is the Sleeping Beauty.)

It is in the reciprocal nature of this gaze that she finds her positioning in relation to the rectory. Through it, she grows used to looking deep inside herself for the answers to the questions that her confrontations with the surrounding world continually cause her to ask. That imperious and sovereign gaze that insistently calls out to her becomes an obligatory reference for Yvette. Throughout the narrative, we witness what we might call a dialogue of gazes between Yvette and the gipsy, punctuated by occasional words and phrases that are suitably conventional and irrelevant. The gipsy is therefore only “seen” and the sight of him is instrumentalised by Yvette, like the reflection in a mirror.

However, together with this symbolic dimension, which Yvette’s perspective constructs for the gipsy (and which we, as readers, share with her), what can be heard throughout the text are discordant notes that relativise such a symbolic status.

Despite the proud boldness of his pariah's gaze, an attribute that is reiterated as if apparently defining his superiority, the gipsy, when confronted, for example, with Major Eastwood, whose subordinate he had been during the war, surprises the reader with the intimidated air and humble attitude that he adopts:

He was *looking up*, as if shyly, at the *big fellow* in the sparkling jersey, who was standing pipe in mouth, man to man, *looking down*. (VG 219, emphases added)

Allowing the major's false authority (which is conferred upon him solely by the military institution to which he belongs) to become established between them, the gipsy replaces his characteristic bold and defiant gaze with a gaze in which he "looks up", displaying an unexpected and despicable subservience. The experience of war, which the narrator almost aphoristically invokes as a justification, is essentially seen as a global trauma that brought with it a loss of faith on the part of all men, without exception:

His race was very old, in its peculiar battle with established society, and had no conception of winning. Only now and then it could score.

But since the war, even the old sporting chance of scoring now and then was pretty well quenched. There was no question of yielding. The gipsy's eyes still had their bold look: but it was hardened and directed far away, the touch of insolent intimacy was gone. He had been through the war. (VG 220-221)

The gipsy and his world are, after all, contaminated by the "social disease", contrary to what the naïve and dreamy Yvette would like to believe. In fact, the opposition between the "free" world of the gipsy and the world of the rectory is not so absolute as might initially be thought and the text even ends up by literally depicting the gipsy as someone caught between two worlds: he was "like a man torn in two".

Also helping to undermine the gipsy's symbolic status are the intertextual references, more precisely and by way of example, I mention the most obvious one – the comparison of Yvette with the Lady of Shalott and the gipsy with Sir Lancelot.

In Tennyson's poem, the character of the Lady of Shalott is isolated in a room at the top of the tower, without any direct contact with the real world

outside. She entertains herself by weaving what she sees reflected in her mirror through the window. When Sir Lancelot appears intrepidly mounted on horseback singing “Tirra-lirra”, she is finally obliged to enter into the outer world, which, for her, represents death. Besides being explicit, the appropriation of Tennyson’s text also has an obvious meaning: until she met the gipsy, Yvette had been content, like the Lady of Shalott, with the reflection of her own image in the mirror. In other words, she had been satisfied with the superficial image of herself that was returned to her by the world of the rectory. She then replaces this mirror, which only allowed her to see the outside reflection of herself, with the gaze of the gipsy. The gipsy’s penetrating look reflects a deep dimension of her and allows her to see the most intimate reality of her burgeoning femininity. He is her Sir Lancelot, ironically riding in a cart and selling pots and pans from door to door.

But it is not just this last circumstance that jeopardizes the image of his romantic heroism. The description of his drenched body, uncontrollably shuddering with cold, shaken relentlessly by a convulsive cough and with his teeth chattering like castanets, seriously compromises the aura of “romance” that, at other moments, the text claims for him. And the “fatalistic resignation” of his look when, next, he accedes to Yvette’s quest to warm her is, to say the least, ambiguous and hardly fits in with the pose of a fighter that had previously defined him and with the power and ascendancy that Yvette had recognised in him. It cannot be said that the final glimpse that we have of him seems to fit in properly with the more characteristic pose of the romantic hero.

And yet, in these final moments of the text, as in so many others, the two dimensions are present: the symbolic dimension and the naturalistic notation, fused together in a way that it is not always easy to disentangle, forcing us to read this final scene (dominated by the biblical image of the flood) simultaneously as a symbolic consummation, but also as a moment in which a principle of reality constantly interferes, ironically undermining the power of the symbol, making it precarious and fragile.

But, if the gipsy is subject to a process of double meaning, submitted to two forces of textual configuration with opposite signs – in other words and metaphorically, if he is “crucified” between two registers by the author himself, something similar also happens with the heroine, who is sometimes conceived of as a “tender virgin” and sometimes seen as an “unpredictable witch”.

This heroine who wishes to challenge the world of conventions and, by going beyond its limits, to enter into a more real world reveals a disconcerting conventionalism at various points in the text. This conventionalism determines, for example, a critical distancing on the part of the narrator (and, by extension, on the part of the reader, too). So that, instead of our continuously “sympathising” with her, what we experience is an oscillation between “sympathy” and distance.

Besides this, the path of her quest is far from being seen exclusively as a successful one. We may summarise her struggle against the “establishment” as a series of metaphorical failures: the mirror that Yvette does not succeed in breaking (Chapter IV); the window that she only half opens, in Chapter II, and which immediately afterwards is closed by her father, are significant instances.

The motif of the window (from which she characteristically contemplates the gipsy) will reappear in the flood scene. It is there that, for the first time, Yvette crosses over the threshold represented by the window. But, as she does so, climbing down the long ladder to the ground (a kind of inversion of Jacob’s dream), she gains access not to a new and unknown world, but to a perfectly familiar world – where the rector is waiting with open arms (the reversal of the marriage ritual). The romantic convention of Yvette’s fainting at the end into her father’s arms is ironically denounced by the narrator through recourse to the “pseudo-objective motivation”: “At the foot of the ladder Yvette *appropriately* fainted in her father’s arms, and was borne away with him, in the car...” (VG 251, emphasis added).

The world that is glimpsed outside, beyond the rubble of the rectory, is essentially the same one that existed at the beginning, and the walls of the temple that she imagined were being gradually destroyed from within were, after all, knocked down by a natural catastrophe whose symbolic resonance is, to a certain extent, counterbalanced by the rational explanation of the phenomenon at the end of the work:

The flood was caused by the sudden bursting of the great reservoir, up in Papple Highdale, five miles from the rectory. It was found out later that an ancient, perhaps even a Roman mine tunnel, unsuspected, undreamed of, beneath the reservoir dam, had collapsed undermining the whole dam. That was why the Papple had been, for that last day, so uncannily full. And then the dam had burst. (VG 251)

A rational explanation after a symbolic opening are inextricably fused together in this passage, illustrating the dual process that is also at work, albeit in a more easily segmented fashion, at other moments in the text.

Let us now look at the brief letter that the gipsy sends to Yvette and which represents the very end of the text:

Dear miss, I see in the paper you are all right after your ducking, as is the same with me. I hope I see you again one day, maybe at Tideswell cattle fair, or maybe we come that way again. I come that day to say good-bye! and I never said it, well, the water give no time, but I live in hopes. Your obdt. servant Joe Boswell. (VG 252)

This small text that the gipsy sends to Yvette after the flood is of great importance in the novel, since it ends up defining his status as a character.

For the first time in the narrative, one of the characters temporarily becomes the narrator and we are directly confronted with his words, without any intermediaries. Furthermore, never, until this moment in the narrative, had the point of view been granted to the gipsy, who had never before “seen”, but had instead “been seen”. Rarely had he been given the word, and when this had happened, it had only been to register his laconic speech and commonplaces, nothing that could truly characterise him in terms of personality. Let us therefore say that, because of this deficiency, the reader was, to a certain extent, unprepared to be confronted with the words of the gipsy, which had, so to speak, been silenced, smothered by the superimposition of his gaze, such as this was received and perceived by Yvette.

This direct confrontation with the gipsy’s speech therefore brings with it a certain element of shock and surprise for the reader. The final letter, with its great abundance of grammatical mistakes, its incorrect syntax and impoverished vocabulary, ironically reverberates around the way in which the text itself is constructed (greatly supported, as we have seen, upon a symbolic structure), surprises the distracted Yvette, alerting her once again to the naivety of her reveries, and once again awakens her to a dimension that she has tended to undervalue and minimise – that of the social world, with its stratification and class differences. What Yvette is confronted with in the letter – the reality of the gipsy as a man in society, with a name, an occupation and the marks of the social group to which he belongs – is, paradoxically, what confers upon the

gipsy simultaneously his insignificance and his grandeur. While, on the one hand, the letter definitively destroys the symbolic illusion which the text seemed to be conveying and reduces the gipsy to the dimensions of a character in a naturalist novel, on the other hand, it is only with this letter that the character's mission in the text is completed – namely, to definitively awaken Yvette from her virginal lethargy. With the result that the destruction of the gipsy as a symbolic element coincides with the moment of his consecration in functional and thematic terms.

It should also be stressed that the letter is signed. And the fact remains firstly that “giving” or “taking” the word, in accordance with the coordinates of this narrative (and not only in this context), means joining in and participating in the civilised social scene, and secondly that such integration cannot be achieved without the identity conferred by the name.

It is not therefore surprising that, in this letter, the gipsy acknowledges that he is someone who signs himself as “your obedient servant” – a conventional formula that ironically subverts the position of ascendancy and power that Yvette had recognised in him, but which clearly expresses the relative positions of the classes to which each of them belongs.

There is, however, one final detail to be noted: the gipsy's name is “Joe Boswell”. Who was Boswell? The intertextual reference is again relevant.

James Boswell (1740-95) – Biographer of Samuel Johnson (*Life of Samuel Johnson*), an eminent man of letters, elected as a member of the *Literary Club* in 1773, and famous for his great stylistic expertise.

It should also be added that this figure became famous for being one of the most notorious libertines in 18th-century England!

What we have, therefore, throughout this work, is the superimposition or juxtaposition of two opposite though simultaneous readings, mutually illuminating like two reciprocal gazes: the symbolic reading and the naturalistic one – both creating a precariously balanced equilibrium between a symbolic pattern of meaning and a resisting principle of reality – both equally necessary as dialogic complements.

Concluding remark

Dating from the latter phase of his work, the novel that Lawrence wrote after *The Virgin and the Gipsy* was *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The opening sentence of this text is: "Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically."

As so often happens in Lawrence's work, his texts can be seen sequentially as replicating or responding to one another. This opening sentence of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* could equally well function as the final comment on *The Virgin and the Gipsy*.

The overall impression that we are left with of the position of the author who is implicit in this story is an image of disillusion; we might apply to him the epithet used by Lawrence to refer to other short narratives produced shortly before this one: "sad". But, despite this, he did not exclude laughter from the story, refusing to accept tragedy as the ultimate truth, or, to quote Bakhtin:

Everything that is truly great must include an element of laughter. Otherwise it becomes threatening, terrible, or pompous: in any case it is limited. Laughter lifts the barrier and cleans the path. (SG)

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**“To be, or not to be, is still the Question”:
Identity and “Otherness” in D. H. Lawrence’s Work**

Introduction

When I first saw the theme for this conference,⁴⁴ the blend of literary (and, in particular, English) elements with some central philosophical and psychological issues was too appealing to me to be resisted. Moreover, the Shakespearian quotation immediately evoked a latter-day writer who, in his work, set out to explore exactly the same type of questions though in a different vein. He addressed them in the name of his commitment to his fellowmen and to life (something that may sound outmoded these days...). That writer is D. H. Lawrence (born in England in 1885 and deceased in 1930) whom most of you may know as a novelist (author of *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, and of such polemical works as *The Plumed Serpent* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*), but who actually was much more than that: he was a poet too, a playwright, an essayist, a critic, a translator, a travel-writer, a painter, and, I will argue, also a thinker. In his work, taken as a whole, you might say that his main concern is a concern with the fulfilment of the individual self: how to be oneself? How to achieve manhood / womanhood? How to fulfil one's deep desires? Throughout his life he tried to answer these basic but momentous questions by means of art: his novels and poems, that he says "come unwatched out of one's pen", (Lawrence 1975: 15) try to answer fictionally to these central questions.

⁴⁴ This paper was first delivered in Portuguese at an interdisciplinary conference on "To be or not to be; to go or not to go – this is the question: Plato – Camões – Shakespeare – Edgar Morin", held at Instituto Piaget (Viseu, 22-24 April 2002). The text printed here corresponds to the English version of that presentation as printed in *Estudos em Homenagem a Margarida Losa* (2006). Org. Ana Luísa Amaral and Gualter Cunha. Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. 155-168. I thank the editors for permission of publication here.

In his essays, always written after the imaginative flights of narrative and lyric, he tries to draw some conclusions (provisional though they may be) and to come to terms (mental and personal terms, that is) with the “passionate experience” (Lawrence 1975: 15) of his artistic writing. This sort of dialectic or double attitude to art and life defines this writer’s very peculiar stance as someone deeply committed to life (in himself and in those around him) and not totally attuned to the prevalent artistic creeds of his own time. Lawrence rejected all aestheticist orientation and proclaimed, instead of “art for art’s sake”, “art for *my* sake”, something he later qualified in recognisably psycho-analytic terms: “[o]ne sheds ones sicknesses in books – repeats and presents again ones emotions, to be master of them” (Lawrence 1981: 90). But in art, his was not a solipsistic stance, as this brief quotation might suggest. Rather, he viewed himself as being deeply committed to his contemporaries believing he could genuinely help them: “I think (...) I have within me a sort of answer to the *want* of today” (Lawrence 1979: 511). This conviction sometimes led him into what has been deplored by literary critics as his “preaching” that at times disastrously interferes with his art and makes him subject to various ideological attacks.

Some observations on Method

This very short introduction to the author, may serve as a kind of apology, a way of making manifest the relevance of such subject matter as this in the context of this conference, and I must only excuse myself before those of you who may be familiar with D. H. Lawrence’s work and for whom my paper may bring no great news. My idea was simply to call attention to aspects of his writing that may be of interest to psychologists, philosophers and cultural thinkers even though his thought is very often better embodied in poems and stories than in his essays, and thus, at first sight, may seem, at best, trackless and contradictory or, at worst, irrelevant. Nevertheless, thought it was, if we accept the writer’s own conviction that: “a real thought, a single thought, not an argument, can only exist easily in verse, or in some poetic form” (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 423). The reason for this apparently unjustified assertion has to do with the writer’s insistence on a concept of thought that goes well beyond the meaning we usually ascribe to it. For Lawrence, thought transcends the mental

or rational activity *per se* and involves the whole of man. And here we should pause briefly to distinguish (as he does) a “bare idea”, an “opinion”, or a “didactic statement” from a “true thought”. The first belong to straightforward mental activity and do not carry with them the intuitive assurance of truth; they lend themselves to doubt and debate, whereas a “true thought” (still according to Lawrence) “comes as much from the heart and genitals as from the head” (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 417) and is accepted as incontrovertible even if temporarily. Lawrence’s “true thoughts” are not offered as disembodied everlasting statements, their truth being dependent rather upon the living circumstances from which they spring.

This epistemological relativism is one of the salient features of Lawrence’s philosophy and aesthetics and it is also made manifest in the way in which he conceives of the novel – seen as the best example of living “interrelatedness” (Lawrence 1983b: 172) that can be achieved and therefore the best artistic means to promote “an instinct for life” (Lawrence 1983d: 198) in its readers. Viewing the novel as a “great discovery” – “far greater than Galileo’s telescope or somebody else’s wireless” (Lawrence 1983e: 179) – and also as a privileged place for reconciling again philosophy and fiction (long ago, pitifully split in our western culture), he believes that the novel, more than any other medium, promotes the kind of experience that for him is central to human beings – a total experience, in that, as he puts it, it “*can* make the whole man-alive tremble” (Lawrence 1983f: 195). It is a response that affects the body as well as the mind. It is, after all, a means of triggering thought, thought in the sense Lawrence ascribes to it in the poem “Thought”, where he gives the following “definition”: “Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending” (Lawrence 1972: v. 2, 673).

I have briefly sketched Lawrence’s line of reasoning in relation to thought as a means of justifying what might seem an otherwise heterodox approach to his work considered as the work of a thinker. If thought is to be conceived of in terms that go beyond Cartesian Reason,⁴⁵ and if, in Lawrence’s proposal, it is better embodied in poems and narrative, than in argumentative prose, then I’ll be surely justified in my option of presenting to you his thought on identity

⁴⁵ For the insufficiencies of Descartes’ philosophy and a critique of Enlightenment rationality see, for instance, the poem “Climb down, o Lordly Mind”, namely the last

and “otherness” – which is the main aim of my paper – by recurring not only to his essayistic writing, as should be expected, but also to his fiction and verse, considered by him as an even more adequate means of channelling true thought.

Identity

I have taken the sentence in the title of my paper from a poem, “Manifesto”, written by Lawrence in 1916, where he utters a kind of personal creed borrowing from Shakespeare Hamlet’s famous *dictum*: “To be, or not to be, that is the question”. Lawrence, however, gives a new twist to the sentence by a slight change in its wording and also by placing it in the context of a stanza (and of a poem) where the main concern is the fulfilment of the self *in relation* to that which is not itself. I think it is worth reading the couple of lines where Shakespeare is quoted:

To be, or not to be, is still the question.
 This ache for being is the ultimate hunger.
 And for myself, I can say “almost, almost, oh, very nearly.”
 Yet something remains.
 Something shall not always remain.
 For the main already is fulfilment.

What remains in me, is to be known even as I know.
 I know her now: or perhaps, I know my own limitation against her
 (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 265)

In the first two lines, Lawrence apparently accepts Shakespeare’s authority: he admits that Hamlet’s question “is *still* the question”, but already he formulates it in terms that are no longer Shakespearian. He speaks of being in strikingly

lines: “Only that exists which exists in my own consciousness. / Cogito, ergo sum. / Only that exists which exists dynamically and unmentalised, in my blood. / Non cogito, ergo sum. / I am, I do not think I am.” (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 475). In virtually all of Lawrence’s essays we find reflections on the insufficiencies of mental knowledge and mental consciousness when taken as exclusive forms of knowledge/consciousness. See, for instance: “Education of the People”, “Democracy”, “We Need One Another”, “On Being a Man”, “Introduction to these Paintings” as possible sources.

bodily terms; he says it is an "*ache* for being" and an "ultimate *hunger*" (my italics). Already we lose sight of the philosophical and pragmatic issues at work in *Hamlet* and are confronted by a reformulation of the question that introduces a new, distinctly lawrencian ring to it. What makes "to be, or not to be" a question that *still* makes sense, is not so much its understanding in terms of duty and responsibility towards oneself and others but the recognition of an inner compulsion "to be", that is not to be evaded. "To be" is something that is imposed upon you not by deliberate thought and action on your part but by a bodily urge, as real and acute as "hunger". And though this urge can be denied (you can starve your body, if you will), it cannot, however, be ignored, as you can ignore a moral question, for instance. In other words, for Lawrence, to assert one's deepest being is simply (but how difficult this may be for us today...) to answer to a physical urge, following "no laws but the laws of our own being" (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 267). To be is to achieve singleness of being unimpaired, by responding directly to the deep desires of your body.⁴⁶

But is it? Is it such a solitary act, concerning solely the individual?

If we attend to the last lines I have just quoted, what comes out more strikingly is precisely the inability of the individual to achieve singleness of being without the full recognition of the other: in any relationship (be it sexual, as is the case here, or other) each partner must acknowledge and confront the other's difference – each has to learn to come to terms with his/her "own limitation against" the other, have the courage to face and experience "the fearful *other flesh*" (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 267, emphasis added) – an experience that is both frightening and exhilarating.

In other words, to be oneself one has to realise and admit the other in its multifarious forms: my singleness of being is the result of the multiple relationships I establish with the world around me all along my life, a continual process that changes from day to day. The recognition that we are human beings lost in the middle of a living cosmos determines that each moment of our lives we are compelled to establish a changing relation to our circum-ambient universe:

⁴⁶ For the difference between "deep desires" and "impulses", and their mechanical surrogates (namely, "functional appetites" and "ideals") see Lawrence (1936a: 714-715).

If we think about it, we find that our life *consists in* this achieving of a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us. This is how I “save my soul”, by accomplishing a pure relationship between me and another person, me and other people, me and a nation, me and a race of men, me and the animals, me and the trees or flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon; an infinity of pure relations, big and little, like the stars of the sky: that makes our eternity, for each one of us (...). (Lawrence 1983b: 172)

In this need of establishing “a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe” we do no more than follow a universal pattern: the same that determines that a flower, in order to blossom (that is, in order *to be*) has to be able to establish with earth and sky those exchanges that enable it to burst into full blossom.⁴⁷ As the flower relates to the natural elements around it and from this relationship derives what is vital for its natural growth and flowering, so man (belonging to a different order of creation, but still being a part of it) has to follow the same path and learn to relate in order to be. That is why, very often in his writing, Lawrence expresses his concept of full being by means of the flower metaphor.

Simple enough as this challenge may seem it proves very difficult in our stage of civilisation, a stage again and again diagnosed by Lawrence as dominated by idealism, materialism and the machine.⁴⁸ All these “evils” decisively contribute to men’s self-enclosure, to sever the links that unite man and nature and to his sense of being absolute in himself and to himself. In the poem “Ego-bound”, the poet takes up the flower image again but this time to synoptically describe humanity’s predicament:

⁴⁷ One should note that inherent in Lawrence’s concept of being is not simply the idea of an organic, physical growth, but also the idea of the excess that accompanies the “spontaneous-creative fullness of being” (Lawrence 1977a: 249) – an idea that is nowhere more explicitly presented than in the first chapters of *Study of Thomas Hardy* (Lawrence 1983d).

⁴⁸ These “evils”, however, have not supervened upon man from the outside. As Lawrence (1935b: 590) recognises in “Education of the People”: “the system, after all, is only the outcome of the human psyche, the human desires.(...) The system is *in* us, it is not something external to us”.

As a plant becomes pot-bound
 man becomes ego-bound
 enclosed in his own limited mental consciousness.

Then he can't feel any more
 or love, or rejoice or even grieve any more,
 he is ego-bound,
 pot-bound
 in the pot of his own conceit,
 and he can only slowly die. (Lawrence 1972: 474-475)

This image of imprisonment and of the concomitant need to shatter the iron-bars of the prison and get free (or, to use the last lines of the poem just quoted: to “burst the pot, /shell of his ego /and get his roots in earth again”) is a recurrent *topos* in Lawrence’s oeuvre. Humanity is seen as “wild things in captivity” (Lawrence 1972: v. 1, 484) and the nature of the gaol varies: it can be industry, the machine and the social mechanism, it can be mental consciousness, it can be money, it can even be false ideals, as love taken as an absolute. In the novel *Women in Love*, for instance, virtually all the characters are somehow trapped – some, like Gerald, the great industrial magnate, succumb unable to get free from social pressures and human entanglements; others, like Birkin, Ursula and even Gudrun, try to survive even if differently: Birkin and Ursula by a commitment to a new kind of marriage (that allegedly will liberate them from the constraints of conventional bourgeois life), Gudrun by continually withdrawing from any serious connection with others – a sort of survival by systematic denial (a nihilistic strategy). The group of intellectuals that crop up in some of the chapters of this novel are trapped by abstract ideas or ideals and entrenched behind their fierce, blind defence (as is the case with Hermione). The young working-class couple, Birkin and Ursula meet at the fair, enacts yet other types of bondage: to social prejudice (they are going to get married because the girl is pregnant), to domesticity (spending the little money they have on furniture), to their social class (unlike Ursula and Birkin they can not afford to buy a piece of furniture and then give it away). Moreover, the young man, Fred, is subtly shown to be in a slightly abject bondage to the pregnant woman, her new house and future plans (“she had got his manhood” – Lawrence 1987: 359).

All these entanglements (that, most often, have to do with social life and self-preservation) can seriously compromise man's achievement of his "living, spontaneous individuality" (Lawrence 1936b: 606); as Birkin says in the same novel: "It's the hardest thing in the world to act spontaneously on one's impulses" (Lawrence 1987: 32). Social expectations, social roles or accepted standards of behaviour build from early childhood a conceited ego ("an ideal self" – Lawrence 1936a: 710) that can disastrously interfere with your primal, spontaneous reality and dictate from without what should be recognised as an inner imperative of the soul, since "consciousness" (not mental consciousness or "image consciousness") "should be a flow from within outwards" and "spontaneous action" should follow "spontaneous awareness" (Lawrence 1936c: 380). Against the tyranny of the ego, living from an outside picture of itself, the only thing to do is to dare shatter the mirror of the worldly self and start anew.

At this point, I would venture to characterise Lawrence's concept of identity, as I understand it, as:

1. organic and vital
2. dynamic
3. unique
4. relational

1. Organic and vital

Both the persistent flower *simile* and the "hunger" and "ache for being" referred to in the poem "Manifesto" suggest Lawrence's deep commitment to the natural body of man as the well-head through which the cosmic vital energies flow. Man's body (seen as "a living organism" – Lawrence 1936b: 618) is the bridge to that universe in motion: it is through the body that the "primal desire" of belonging to life and coming into being is felt first and foremost.⁴⁹

Moreover, the body is seen as the seat of real feelings (as opposed to mental feelings) and, as such, should be implicitly trusted. This leads Lawrence

⁴⁹ The body, and not only the mind is, therefore, also seen as a source of knowledge (variously called by Lawrence "blood knowledge", "dark" or "intuitive knowledge"): "Oh yes, my body, me alive, *knows*, and knows intensely" (Lawrence 1983f: 194).

to create novelistic characters that are very different from those that appear in the novels of his predecessors or of his contemporaries: their moral and psychological coherence is very often ruptured by “unaccountable” reactions or decisions rendered in bodily terms. As he himself admits, he is no longer interested in the stable ego or personality of his characters but in their inhuman will that emanates from their body (something they are hardly conscious of).⁵⁰

2. *Dynamic*

This organic vitalism of the self is intimately linked with its insertion in the universe, and since Lawrence conceives of the universe, as has been already alluded to, as being forever in motion and men as an integral part of it, so he must perceive human identity as a continually changing adjustment between man and the universe around him: “[t]he universe is like Father Ocean, a stream of all things slowly moving: (...) There is nothing man can do, but to maintain himself in true relationship to his contiguous universe” (Lawrence 1983a: 167).

This dynamism can be illustrated in fictional terms by the characters in his novel *The Rainbow* (1915). Here they are depicted as fragmentary in themselves and as if carried by a “wave” or a “wind” that makes them act in certain unforeseen ways at decisive moments in their lives. It is as if they derive from the natural world around them a vital force and inspiration that leads them unawares. The main characters in this novel do not entirely belong to themselves (and their free-will is as if temporarily suspended); they give themselves over and are subject to “the greater ordering” that encompasses human beings and the natural world:

As he worked alone on the land, or sat up with the ewes at lambing time, the facts and materials of his daily life fell away, leaving the kernel of his purpose clean. And then it came upon him that he would marry her and she would be his life.

.....

⁵⁰ Cf. Letter to Edward Garnett, where Lawrence explains his new approach to his fictional characters (Lawrence 1981: 182-184).

But during the long February nights with the ewes in labour, looking out from the shelter into the flashing stars, he knew he did not belong to himself. He must admit that he was only fragmentary, something incomplete and subject. There were the stars in the dark heaven travelling, the whole host passing by on some eternal voyage. So he sat small and submissive to the greater ordering. (Lawrence 1989: 39-40)

This dynamic interdependence between the self and the world around it makes self-knowledge difficult. This is why, in his poem “Know thyself, and that thou are mortal”, we read: “If you want to know yourself / you’ve got to keep up with yourself./ ... / and you’ve got to run, to keep up with it” (Lawrence 1972: v.1, 543).

3. *Unique*

This dynamism inherent in identity is further complemented by what could seem, at first sight, paradoxical: the notion of the uniqueness of individual identity. This uniqueness of the self is emphasised in his essay “Democracy” where he repudiates the modern democratic ideal for being, according to him, based on the false assumption that all men are equal. It is not that he denies that all men should be treated equally in terms of justice, civil rights and of their basic needs, but he rejects any notion of equality that goes beyond that, because he prefers to radically affirm their difference. To Lawrence all men are different and he repudiates such abstractions as the “Average” as simply convenient tools for the purpose of statistics but irrelevant beyond that.⁵¹ Therefore the democracy he defends is not the “Democracy of the Average” but a “new democracy” (Lawrence 1936a: 709) in which man’s inherent differences from each other are given place. Throughout his work, Lawrence never tires of arguing in favour of man’s/woman’s uniqueness: “Each human self is single, incommutable and unique. This is the first reality. Each self is unique and therefore incomparable” (Lawrence 1936a: 714). For him, no social scheme would do that would not accommodate such difference. (I think he would not feel very comfortable with present day globalisation and cloning...)

⁵¹ Taken out of context, repudiation of democracy such as this, contributed in part to earn Lawrence the epithet of totalitarian or even fascist thinker.

4. *Relational*

However, uniqueness or singularity does not mean, in any way, isolation or apartness. Singleness of being can only be achieved in relation and in contradistinction to what surrounds us because, as Lawrence says in his essay "We need One Another":

We have our individuality in relationship. (...) Apart from our connexions with other people, we are barely individuals, we amount, all of us, to next to nothing. It is in the living touch between us and other people, other lives, other phenomena that we move and have our being. (Lawrence 1936d: 190)

And this emphasis on relationship or connection between human beings and their surroundings leads us to the last (though by no means least important) feature of identity: its relational or dialogic character. I am *in relation to* the other, the not-me, all that is beyond my body and my understanding. The other confronts me as foreign and different and this radical strangeness confirms my individuality. In other words, I realise my humanity when I confront an animal, and my peculiar way of life when I apprehend the life of a tree or a plant, and my womanhood when I touch a man, and so on. I am brought back upon myself when I "lose" myself in the irreducible presence of the other. If I am unable to achieve this awareness of the other, then I will not be able to achieve my being – my life will be a pretence, artificially held together – it will not be rooted in the world. This is Lawrence's position.

"Otherness"

Both the difficulty of apprehending and accepting the other and the vital need of such awareness is what comes out vividly from one of Lawrence's first short stories, "Odour of Chrysanthemums" (written in 1910) where a young wife is suddenly faced by the dead body of her husband brought back to her after an accident in the coal-mine where he worked. She then realises for the first time that their married relationship amounts to nothing because she (at least) has been unable to see and accept his "otherness":

(...) [S]he knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her, they had met in the dark and had fought in the dark, not knowing whom they met or whom they fought. And now she saw, and turned silent in seeing. For she had been wrong. She had said he was something he was not; she had felt

familiar with him. Whereas he was apart all the while, living as she never lived, feeling as she never felt.

(...)She looked at his face, and she turned her own face to the wall. For his look was other than hers, his way was not her way. She had denied him what he was – she saw it now. She had refused him as himself. And this had been her life, and his life. She was grateful to death, which restored the truth. (Lawrence 1983c: 198)

This passage enacts dramatically the central place of “otherness” in Lawrence’s thought and art. Let us now look at the way in which he addresses the issue in argument:

When I stand in the presence of another man, and I am my own pure self, am I aware of the presence of an equal, or of an inferior, or of a superior? I am not. When I stand with another man, who is himself, and when I am truly myself, then I am only aware of a Presence, and of the strange reality of Otherness. There is me, and there is *another being*. (...) There is no comparing or estimating. There is only this strange recognition of *present otherness*. (Lawrence 1936a: 715)

The other is here viewed in terms of a presence to be reckoned with, irreducible and incomparable to the subject-gazer: not equal, not inferior, not superior. Also worthy of note in this essay is the emphasis on the fact that both the onlooker and the one before him/her should retain their identity and integrity (and not be tempted by any sort of mixing and mingling that would destroy the relationship). The relevant difference here is between what Lawrence elsewhere describes as “feeling with” and “feeling for”.⁵² The first attitude is sympathy in its true sense of com-passion “which is partaking of the passion which” is in the soul of the other. Whereas “feeling for” corresponds to the temptation to merge your identity in that of the other and lose sight of your own position – a sort of self-sacrifice. This Lawrence clearly repudiates.

It is precisely the first attitude referred to that we see at work in Lawrence’s book of poems *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* where each poem presents the unmediated encounter (and a coming to terms) with non-human beings,

⁵² This distinction is made in the essay on Walt Whitman in Lawrence (1977b: 183-185).

belonging to different species. Here Lawrence transforms animals and plants into interlocutors, whom he questions and observes, gradually trying to grasp their inner nature and modes of life – that is, their "otherness", their difference from him. But he never sentimentalises the relationship and fiercely retains his place as man in a man-made world (with his prejudices and limitations), as will be illustrated in the poem "Bat":

At evening, sitting on this terrace,
When the sun from the west, beyond Pisa, beyond
the mountains of Carrara
Departs, and the world is taken by surprise ...

.....

Look up, and you see things flying
Between the day and the night;
Swallows with spools of dark thread sewing the shadows together.

.....

And you think:
"The swallows are flying so late!"

Swallows?

Dark air-life looping
Yet missing the pure loop ...
A twitch, a twitter, an elastic shudder in flight
And serrated wings against the sky,
Like a glove, a black glove thrown up at the light,
And falling back.

Never swallows!

Bats!

The swallows are gone.

.....

Bats, and an uneasy creeping in one's scalp
As the bats swoop overhead!
Flying madly.

.....

Wings like bits of umbrella.

Bats!

Creatures that hang themselves up like an old rag, to sleep;

And disgustingly upside down.

Hanging upside down like rows of disgusting old rags

And grinning in their sleep.

Bats!

..... (Lawrence 1972: v.1, 340-342)

Here the poet's eye observes keenly and dispassionately in a kind of acute attentiveness that enables him to see beyond errors of perception and stereotyped vision and accede to a renewed relationship with the animal. However, he never relinquishes his position –notice the repetition of “disgustingly” and “disgusting” near the end and notice also the closing lines of the poem: “In China the bat is symbol of happiness./ Not for me!”

Sometimes in his effort of profound attention he almost gains a certain degree of empathy with the object held in dialogue, as happens in “Fish”, where the subaqueous sensations of a fish being carried by the liquid element are enacted for the imaginative benefit of the reader:

Your life a sluice of sensation along your sides,

A flush at the flails of your fins, down the whorl of your tail,

And water wetly on fire in the grates of your gills;

Fixed water-eyes. (Lawrence 1972: v.1, 335)

The poet is momentarily lost in an imaginative rehearsal of being a fish – not to annul the difference and the distance that separates them but better to enhance and capture them. That is why, nearer to the end of the poem, he is led to admit: “They are beyond me, are fishes” (Lawrence 1972: v.1, 338).

In other poems in the same volume, Lawrence takes fruits (such as the peach, the fig and grapes) and also trees (for instance, cypresses and almond trees) as interlocutors whose presence is addressed and questioned. These very weird, lively and suggestive dialogic pieces are, by no means, the only examples of this writer's interest for the other.⁵³ Throughout his work we are continually

⁵³ On the uneven rendering of “otherness” in these poems see, for instance, Sword (2001, especially p.128).

faced with interhuman relationships where each partner reacts and adjusts in peculiar ways to the challenge posed by the other: either by failing to admit him/her (as was the case in “Odour of Chrysanthemums”) or by gradually learning to come to terms with “otherness” (as happens with Tom and Lydia in *The Rainbow*). But Lawrence ventures into further dialogical encounters, when viewing other cultures and other races, as is the case with the American Indians. Even though we may have momentary misgivings when reading him on such matters, in our times of ‘political correctness’, yet we cannot fail to notice the honesty and directness with which he registers this encounter. All this comes out in his poem “O! Americans” where an unmistakable commitment to the American Indians’ cause is also evident and where the irony inherent in his treatment of the official position towards natives should not go unnoticed:⁵⁴

The American Indian lingers here, ward of the American government.
Now make up your mind about it, he is not as we are.

He lingers on from an old, savage world, that still has its treasures of
conscientiousness, its subtle barbaric forms of civilisation.

He is, basically, a savage: it is a term of reproach,
but also, it is not a term of reproach.

The American Indian is, basically, a savage.

But be careful how you destroy him.

Because he is so *absolutely* in your power, that, before God,
you must be careful.

Noblesse oblige!

Be careful before you destroy him.

Be careful how you turn him into a hundred-per-cent American.

He is the one thing that is aboriginally American.

Don’t sentimentalise about him.

Realize. (Lawrence 1972: vol.2, 776)

This last appeal to realisation tells us a lot about Lawrence’s position to “otherness” – he refuses to falsify the relationship between whites and Indians in any way: by a spurious sense of superiority, by any sort of idealisation or

⁵⁴ On Lawrence’s post-colonial positioning see Kinkead-Weekes (2001).

sentimentality. He argues for “imaginative sympathy” (as Mark Kinkead-Weekes has recently called it).⁵⁵ This appeal asks for a broadening of our sympathies that can not fail to have ethical and political effects, very much attuned to the way in which questions of ethnical, cultural and sexual identity are now being addressed in the fields of literary and cultural studies and more specifically in Post-colonial and Feminist studies.

Conclusion

Thus what can be viewed and called Lawrence’s “ethics of alterity” (Sargent and Watson 2001: 421) should be put in historical perspective and seen in terms of present-day discussions on the way “otherness” and “difference” can constitute a way-out of Postmodernism’s ethical impasse. This is precisely what Sargent and Watson (2001) have done in a recent article on Lawrence and the dialogical principle where they align him with such thinkers as Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray and where his “ethics of alterity” is reassessed in the context of the ongoing debate about the place, the status and the philosophical, ethical and political relevance of the concept of the “other” as a positive basis for human agency in the world.⁵⁶ Lawrence can be relevant here precisely because the way in which he deals with the concept of “otherness” does not necessarily entail a “radical untranslatability” (Mohanty 1989: 21)⁵⁷ that would lead in the end to a refusal of the “material existence” (Waugh 1992: 196) of the other and thus to avoid and ignore its actual presence.

⁵⁵ Keith Sagar, who has kindly read this paper and made some very relevant suggestions, informed me that he himself had been using the same expression very often in his writings, borrowing it from Walter Stein in a book of 1969, *Criticism as Dialogue*.

⁵⁶ For the difficulties and dangers of a too radical understanding of “otherness” that compromises any serious positive project based on it, see S. P. Mohanty’s “Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism” (1989), and Patricia Waugh’s “Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory” in her *Postmodernism: a Reader* (1992, especially pp. 196-197).

⁵⁷ Here one should, nevertheless, note that, at certain moments in his work and life, Lawrence sees the other as something forever unknowable, he even uses the expression “untranslatable otherness” (Lawrence 1964: 17). But he tries all the time to grasp this “otherness” and accept it in its difference.

We can look at Lawrence’s work as a whole as a life-long effort at coming to terms with the material presence of the other, even if we recognise that this effort has not always been uniformly successful. He calls his poetry “poetry of the immediate present” (Lawrence 1972: v.1, 182) and I would even venture to describe his artistic endeavour as *an art of the immediate presence*. In it, it is central to capture the living other and to do so he has to register it “in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things” (Lawrence 1972: v.1: 183), i.e., he has to apprehend it in the immediate context of its “material existence” and this relationality is what redeems “otherness” from disembodied abstraction or from becoming the object of suspicious sacralization that would disastrously remove it from the zone of living contact. Stories and poems, as we have seen, are the privileged sites where “otherness” (human or inhuman) is dramatised and given full play and where it enters into a dialogical encounter that can even entail a change in the participants involved.

His is a philosophy based after all on a confident apprehension of life in man and in the universe around him and Lawrence is determined to make of existence a joyful experience both for himself and for others. Thus, his final incitement could not be other but an incitement to life, but one firmly rooted in reality:

Stand up for a new arrangement
for a chance of life all round
for freedom, and the fun of living
bust in, and hold the ground! (Lawrence 1972: vol.1, 560)

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Cannibalism and the Bourgeois Order: Rereading Conrad's "Falk"⁵⁸

⁵⁸ This paper was first published in *Anglo-Saxónica, Revista do Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa* Série II, 8/9 (1998): 259-278.

When I was reading “Falk” the words of a poem by the German expressionist poet Jakob Van Hoddis (1887-19?) kept on coming again and again to my mind especially its first line that reads: “Dem Bürger fliegt vom spitzen Kopf der Hut” (“The hat flies from the sharp-headed bourgeois”).⁵⁹ Undoubtedly two elements in the line were responsible for my (at first) unaccountable association: the incongruity afforded by the oxymoron in “sharp head” and the importance of the hat as a defining item for the “sharp-headed bourgeois”. It seems to me, as I will try to prove shortly, that “Falk” is a text about the bourgeois order seen in terms of both its conventionality as the (institutional) support of a certain stage in the development of our civilization and more specifically of the capitalist system and its hostility to the natural order. In it the middle-class ethos is subjected to scrutiny and indirectly criticized very often by means of absurd and unexpected contiguities – equivalent, in narrative terms, to the “sharp head” of Van Hoddis’s poem.

But there are other suggestions in the poem worth considering for their proximity to some of the thematic emphases of Conrad’s text. The title of the

⁵⁹ The whole poem reads: “Dem Bürger fliegt vom Spitzten Kopf der Hut, / In allen Lüften hallt es wie Geschrei, / Dachdecker stürzen ab und gehn entzwei / Und an den Küsten – liest man – steigt die Flut. // Der sturm ist da, die wilden Meere hupfen / An land, um dicke Dämme zu zerdrücken. / Die meisten Menschen haben einen Schnupfen. / Die Eisenbahnen fallen vom den Brücken.”

A more or less literal translation would be: “The hat flies from the sharp-headed bourgeois, / The whole air vibrates with shrieking, / Tilers fall down and split in two / And on the coast – one reads – the tide rises. // The storm is at hand, the wild seas leap / Over the land, to destroy thick dams. / Most people have a cold. / The trains fall from the bridges.”

poem “Weltende” (“End of the World”) and some of the disruptions brought about by this peculiar apocalypse strike one not so much for their intensity and destructive power as paradoxically for their absurd and unexpectedly weakened effects. The fury of the natural elements – wind and waters – though strong enough in its manifestations does not seem to endanger the *status quo* seriously and its effects are remote from the majority of people – indeed they are presented as something you read about in newspapers but that does not really affect you: “an den Küsten – liest man – steigt die Flut” (“On the coast – one reads – the tide rises”). It is as though the bourgeois order with its distorted and anti-natural ethos is relatively immune to (or unable to perceive) the disorder and upheaval surrounding it and, in the end, its consequences amount to no more than a ridiculous universal cold – “Die meisten Menschen haben einen Schnupfen” (“Most people have a cold”). More or less the same applies to Conrad’s text.⁶⁰ In it the bourgeois order, emblematically represented by Hermann’s character in “his embroidered calotte” and “cloth slippers” and by the insularity of his ship, is challenged by the frankness of an elemental force embodied in Falk and, surprisingly enough, and in spite of a slight, temporary disturbance, is not greatly affected by having faced an unknown and until then unacknowledgeable voice from the wilderness. On the contrary, Falk’s ruthlessly frank voice and grotesque story are silenced and suppressed in favour of the false superficiality of gossip. In the end it is Schomberg’s story about Falk having won his wife at cards that wins the day.

Now it seems to me that what is at stake in “Falk” (as in “Typhoon” before) is the confrontation of the unheroic, unimaginative, middle-class man with the unknown truth of an elemental force – the fury of the sea in Captain MacWhirr’s case and Falk’s hunger (a metaphor for all genuine desire) in Hermann’s.

⁶⁰ “Falk” was written in the end of 1900, immediately after “Typhoon” and the expressionist poem “Weltende” is dated 1911 though it was published in an anthology much later (Pörtner 1958). I use Van Hoddis’ poem here in a merely instrumental way as a means of better enhancing some of the points I want to make in relation to Conrad’s short story. In no way do I wish to suggest (even less argue) a case of influence or an anticipation of expressionism on Conrad’s part, though his modernity and experimentalism are worth reiterating.

To reconsider "Falk" in the terms here suggested one should bear in mind two of Conrad's remarks about his short stories in general and about this one in particular. The first concerns the author's warning on the "unity of outlook" and "inner consistency" of each of his short story volumes and his deploring the separate publication of "Typhoon" in 1902 (cf. Kirschner 1992: 3-4). The second has to do with what he says in a letter to David Meldrum in relation to "Falk", where he declares: "Hermann and his wife are the people I wanted to *do*, the story of Falk being more or less of a foil to the main purpose" (Conrad 1990: v.2, 441).

Taken together both remarks seem to me to suggest that what the Hermanns are made to represent here should also be present in the other stories in the set. For me precisely one of the most interesting thematic links running through the book is the idea of marriage as a dead-end or a trap. If the "profounder sources"⁶¹ from which the consistency of the four stories in the volume sprang were to be found in the author's life predicament at the time he produced these texts, it would not be difficult to summon up evidence to my thesis. What I mean to say is simply that having recently married (1896) and having to provide for a wife and child (his son Borys was born in January 1898) and being solely dependent on his work as a writer to survive, Conrad actually experienced how family ties and financial worries could become a permanent source of anxiety. Writing to Meldrum in August 1899 he characteristically doubted his own writing capacities and deplored the effort involved in his writing activity:

What wonder then that during the long blank hours the doubt creeps into the mind and I ask myself whether I am fitted for that work. The worst is that while I am thus powerless to produce my imagination is extremely active: whole paragraphs, whole pages, whole chapters pass through my mind. (...) I've thought a volume in a day till I felt sick in mind and heart and gone to bed completely done up, without having written a line. The effort I put out should give birth to masterpieces as big as mountains – and it brings forth a ridiculous mouse now and then.

⁶¹ In his "Preface to the 'The Shorter Tales of Joseph Conrad'", Conrad (1925: 207-09) argues that the "unity of outlook" and "inner consistency" of each of his short-story volumes sprang "from sources profounder than the logic of deliberate theory".

Therefore I must sell my mice as dear as I can since I must live; (...). It looks as if I were very mercenary but, God knows, it is not so. I am impatient of material anxieties and they frighten me too because I feel how mysteriously independent of myself is my power of expression. (...) I am not as the workmen who can take up and lay down their tools. I am, so to speak, only the agent of an unreliable master. (CLCJ, 2, 191)

When reading the letters of this period (1898-1902) one often encounters anxious references to transitory though recurrent blanks in his writing activity that prevented him to come up to scheduled deadlines set up by publishers (or even by himself). At such occasions he would sit on at his desk agonisingly waiting for the words to fill in the blank pages and not daring to stay away from home, trapped between his family responsibilities and his “unreliable master” (whimsically coming and going, impervious to the writer’s and his family’s material needs).

Conrad’s personal experience of marriage at the time is thus intimately linked with his sense of bondage to two often contradictory liabilities: his family and his writing, giving him at times a sense of powerlessness.⁶² Moreover in 1899 he had given up entirely his career as a seaman and in moments of anxiety like the ones depicted above he would more than ever resent the constraints of life on shore and experience a sense of unreality.⁶³ It is not surprising then that this anxiety was partly transferred to some of the works he was producing, though intelligently transmuted into something very

⁶² It is not my purpose here to evaluate how successful (or not) Conrad’s marriage to Jessie Conrad was, in the way Bernard C. Meyer did in his *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytical Biography* (1967) or in the way Frederic Karl tried to correct Meyer’s view in his own *Joseph Conrad: Three Lives. A Biography* (1979). Besides, Zdzisław Najder (1983) gives us evidence of how unfounded some of Meyer’s psychoanalytical assertions were in what concerned Conrad’s relationship with women. My sole purpose then is simply to infer from what Conrad says in his letters the kind of experience he was living in his early married life and how its oblique echo is still discernible in some of the writing he produced at the time.

⁶³ See, f.i., the letter of the 19th of January 1900 to Cunninghame Graham (Conrad 1990: vol. 2, 243) and the letter of the 12th of October 1899 to E.L. Sanderson (Conrad 1990: vol. 2, 205).

different from the lived experience. Indeed what is to be found in the four stories that make up the *Typhoon* volume is the theme of marriage – marriage as a social institution upon which the bourgeois order is founded is critically brought into focus and scrutinized. It is seen as a place where the strains and the true motive powers of society and man's place in it are revealed and acutely felt. What is brought forward in these stories is the materialistic ethos behind man's actions in the social world and his essential and final solitude in view of the indifference of such an utilitarian and individualistic society. Simultaneously, throughout them all, runs a subtle sense of the unreality assaulting the individual absorbed in a civilized domesticity that hinders him from a close contact with nature and a naked confrontation with elemental forces.

In "Typhoon" Captain MacWhirr's clash with "the wrath and fury of the passionate sea" and his episodic transcendence of his own "placid" condition of life goes significantly unnoticed by an insensitive wife who regards her husband "as no more than a passport to respectability and good shopping" (Kirschner 1992: 11). "Amy Foster" gives us another instance of marriage's failure to accommodate man's deepest needs. What is here stressed is the inability of finally facing and accepting the other as different. Janko's marriage to Amy moreover proves illusory as a means of effective integration in the rural community where he found himself stranded: Amy's fear of her husband strangeness supersedes in the end her original feelings of compassion or even love and her maternal instinct prompts her to the ruthless desertion of her dying, thirsty husband who is eventually faced with his own true condition – the "loneliness and despair" of "a bird caught in a snare".⁶⁴ It is of a woman's solitude that "To-morrow" (the last story in the set) tells us about. Bessie Carvil is left in the end "tottering silently back towards her stuffy little inferno of a cottage", the slave of a tyrant father and the victim of the old man's frantic

⁶⁴ These expressions occur in the final paragraph of the story but the second one is a repetition of a similar one – "a wild bird caught in a snare" (Conrad 1992: 150) – echoed throughout the text in equivalent expressions: "a poor mouse in a trap" (138) or "an animal under a net" (140). Both Janko, Falk and Harry Hagbert (and also, to a certain extent, MacWhirr) are insistently assimilated to animals – a sign of their potential links to the natural world – but menaced by society and civilization.

illusions, after having heard the harsh denigration of marriage by the only man she was ever willing to marry. Harry Hagbert irretrievably walks away from her refusing to become “a blamed tame rabbit in a cage”.

The theme of marriage and of the social system founded upon it is handled in a specific way in “Falk”: because of the more jocular tone of Dickensian comedy the second narrator uses when presenting us with Hermann and his family on board his *Diana* of Bremen. This narrator’s buoyant indulgence should not blind us, however, to his own avowed allegiances. Very early in the narrative he makes clear his own position vis-à-vis the other characters in the story which (according to him), “concerns only me, my *enemy* Falk, and my *friend* Hermann” (Conrad 1992: 166, emphasis added). Identifying with the bourgeois order and values represented by Hermann, even though he recognizes they are somewhat stretched to the outer limits with this family,⁶⁵ the narrator equally exhibits the logic of a dispassionate tradesman when facing difficult situations and thus indirectly warns the reader of the need to gain a certain ironic detachment from his word and stance.⁶⁶ This detachment is, after all, more in accordance with the bleak comic view inherent to the unredeemed state of affairs that is conveyed by the story itself, in spite of the narrator’s word. In this respect it is worth noting the relevance of the frame-narrator and the way in which he introduces the main framed-narrative, for he places the story that is to follow in and calls attention to a wider context and thus implicitly gives it a deeper significance. He enhances a contrast between the degenerate, rotten state of the present-day civilized world (metaphorically signalled by the sordidness of the immediate surroundings of the group of seamen gathered in a riverside hostel and by the “excrable” dinner they get there) and the satisfaction of “primeval man” eating his “scorched lumps of flesh” and telling his “artless tales”. The contrast to which the main narrator

⁶⁵ A relevant passage reads: “Purity, not cleanliness, is the moral. It was pushed so far that I seemed to detect in this too a sentimental excess, as if dirt had been removed in very love. It is impossible to give you an idea of such a meticulous neatness. It was as if every morning that ship had been arduously explored with – with toothbrushes” (Conrad 1992: 174).

⁶⁶ On Conrad’s relation to his (largely autobiographical) material and of his choice of such a narrator see Johnson (1965, especially pp. 276 and 283).

calls attention is smaller in scope and tells of his own limitations as narrator. Instead of bringing into focus the opposition civilization vs. primitivism, his reminiscence is primarily centred on the difference between a time not long past when the profession of sailor was viewed as "the ancient and honourable craft of the sea" and subsequent times that have turned a Master Mariner into a ship-conductor ("Schiff-fürher") and ships into floating cottages presided over by the captains' wives.

The slightly critical but always indulgent tone of the second and main narrator in relation to Hermann as a representative of this new state of affairs requires the reader to be particularly alert when viewing the case presented by him, i.e., the reader should bear in mind that this is not simply a story concerned with the three men at a time when the growing constraints of financial considerations had supplanted and even suppressed "old-fashioned" values as honour and heroism, but a means of diagnosing deeper truths about the direction taken by modern civilized man away from primitivism and about the price to be paid for thus breaking away from nature.⁶⁷

The ship, *Diana*, is the caricature microcosm used in the text to mirror the bourgeois order. Its reduction in the beginning to the dimensions of a "wooden plough", a "miller's wagon" and a "cottage" suggests its metaphoric and metonymic function. It is characteristically seen by the narrator as an abode of domestic peace and "arcadian felicity" which moves and attracts him, its cabin being "more like a farm kitchen than a ship's cuddy. The sea and all nautical affairs seem[ed] very far removed from the hospitality of this exemplary family" (Conrad 1992: 171). But at the same time the invasion of the ship's sphere by domesticity gives evidence of a process of degeneration or decadence that affects not only the shipping craft but society in general. This invasion of domesticity produces all sorts of disruptions, displacements, reversals and reductions suggesting equivalent upheavals on a broader social scale. The first glimpse we get of the ship is dominated by the image of clothes

⁶⁷ In my view one should distinguish between unsentimental argument (clearly dependent on the frame-narrator) and the main narrator's nostalgic and sentimental insistence in giving a heroic and mythical aura to Falk and to Hermann's niece, a strategy he is unable to sustain convincingly to the end of the story.

drying in the wind⁶⁸ and clothes, almost as much as food,⁶⁹ are to become a dominant presence throughout the text. Their significance is related to Hermann's married state and to the presence of women on board (always seen either in the act of washing clothes or in the act of sewing them) and to a feminine obsession with hygiene or fear of dirt which in its turn can be read as a sign of civilization's break with the natural order. Moreover it was Conrad himself who elsewhere gave us the clue to yet another meaning of clothes, when equating them with moral principles – principles were, he said, mere “acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags”⁷⁰ thus hinting at superficiality as the hallmark of the bourgeois ethos. A fixed standard of conduct based on public opinion instead of on the individual's sense of his own selfhood is as artificial and external as the clothes he wears. This much is confirmed by the curious and repeated conjunction in the text of Hermann as *pater familias* and representative of “civic virtue” and the clothes he is wearing: “he put on his head an embroidered round cap with a tassel and changed his boots for a pair of cloth strippers. Afterwards he smoked at the cabin-door, looking at his children with an air of civic virtue” (Conrad 1992: 171) – it is as though clothes and “civic virtue” are seen as interchangeable commodities here.

Whenever they are described throughout the narrative the Hermanns are always depicted in terms of the clothes they are wearing; even life on board is

⁶⁸ The passage reads: “On most days little frocks and pinafores could be seen drying *in the mizzen rigging of his ship, or a tiny row of socks fluttering on the signal halyards*; but once a fortnight the family washing was exhibited in force. It *covered the poop entirely*. The afternoon breeze would incite to a weird and flabby activity all that crowded mass of clothing, with its vague suggestions of *drowned, mutilated and flattened humanity. Trunks without heads* waved at you *arms without hands; legs without feet* kicked fantastically with collapsible flourishes” (Conrad 1992: 167-168, emphasis added). First we have the unexpected contiguity between the children clothes and specific parts of the ship, then the idea of dismemberment, mutilation and fragmentation of the bodily presences invoked by the hollow clothes. The latter is not only proleptically linked to Falk's cannibalistic acts disclosed in the final section of the text but also suggests a lack of integrity in present day humanity defined more in terms of externals than of their inner reality.

⁶⁹ For an interpretation of the meaning of food in Conrad's text see Tanner (1979: 17-36).

⁷⁰ The expression occurs in *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1981: 52).

dominated by clothes: naval operations are reduced to the simple act of Hermann taking off his coat – “as soon as he returned from the shore on board his ship *he commenced operations by taking off his coat*” (Conrad 1992: 171, emphasis added); and the only riots disturbing the domestic peace on board that “patriarchal old tub” are carried out by clothes frantically moving in the wind – “the multi-coloured grotesque riot going on abaft her mizzen-mast” (Conrad 1992: 168); otherwise the peace is absolute for not even the sea disturbs it; sea billows are here significantly substituted by “billows of white stuff (lying) between the chairs on the cabin floor” (Conrad 1992: 175). In this story we thus completely lose sight of the wild sea; what is left of it are the stagnant waters of “a certain Eastern seaport” crossed by sandbanks.⁷¹ Noteworthy are the similarities between these shallow waters and the sea view confronting the guests at the very beginning of the narrative; this view equally suggests an absurd reduction for which man feels obliged to compensate by supplying “grandiose names” to ridiculously diminished realities⁷²: “that shallow and dangerous puddle to which our coasting men give the grandiose name of ‘German Ocean’” (Conrad 1992: 165).

The same ironic strategy of giving great names coming from the mythical past to (diminished) modern realities is operative throughout this text⁷³ as a means of implying how impossible or subject to deformity the survival of a heroic past in modern times is.⁷⁴ From the name of Hermann's ship, “Diana not

⁷¹ References to “gales” and a “heavy sea” only occur when Falk's story is disclosed near the end. But note that it is told at third remove (both in terms of its position inside a framed-narrative and in temporal terms) – thus comfortably distanced from the reader. Also significant in this respect is the fact that more or less ninety per cent of the story is told in indirect speech by the narrator, Falk's direct speech being avoided.

⁷² The same applies to the telling of stories: “primeval man” told “artless tales”, modern man tells (artful?) tales as a means of compensating for what he has lost. The idea of the consolatory, artificial character of modern fiction seems to me to be implicitly present in the third paragraph of the text and may be read as an indirect allusion to Conrad's own predicament.

⁷³ It occurs in other works by Conrad, f.i. in *The Secret Agent*. See Meyers (1968: 57-59).

⁷⁴ We use the term “heroic past” in the sense given to the expression by Manuel Antunes in his *História da Cultura Clássica: Aulas Teóricas* (1970: 345-346), which seems to be

of Ephesus but of Bremen,” “physically incapable of engaging in any sort of chase” (Conrad 1992: 168)⁷⁵ to the characterization of Falk as a Hercules or Ulysses pathetically craving for marriage and respectability, what is given is the picture of a time unable to accommodate more than the linguistic husks of a heroic era with no appropriate referents underlying them, or else the distorted replicas of its heroes – our “age of steam” and mechanisms turns the incomprehensible and uncomprehended specimen which is Falk into an absurd mixture of man and machine – a centaur of modern times: “he was a composite. Not a man-horse, (...), but a man-boat” (Conrad 1992: 177). Moreover this impossible mixture is further complicated by paradoxically appending a Christian consciousness to him (evident in his first name, Christian, and emblematically evident in “his anchorite’s bony head filled with

particularly appropriate: «(Época heróica) é uma época em que o mundo humano já não é “primitivo” mas ainda não é civilizado. Uma época em que o homem se realiza muito mais através da “praxis” do que através da “theoria”, da acção do que da contemplação. Através da acção se revelam os “heróis”, cujo destino é lutar ou contra outros heróis seus iguais, ou contra simples seres humanos muito superiores em número, ou contra forças brutas da natureza. Tensos na vontade de conquistar, com essa luta, glória imortal entre os mortais, como diz Heraclito de Éfeso, em torno do seu nome forma-se a lenda mística que os faz durar e perdurar na memória dos homens. Na sua acção os heróis manifestam dois instintos primários da natureza humana a que hoje a “Tiefenpsychologie” (psicologia das profundezas) tem prestado particular atenção: a agressividade e a vontade de poder (a “Wille zur Macht” de Nietzsche)». [“A heroic age is an era when the human world is no longer ‘primitive’ though not yet ‘civilized’ either. An era when man asserts himself much more through ‘praxis’ than through ‘theoria’, through action rather than through contemplation– The ‘heroes’ reveal themselves through action, their destiny being to fight against similar heroes or against mere human beings, though much more numerous, or against natural elemental forces. Tense in their wish to conquer, through their fight, immortal glory among the mortals, as Heraclites of Ephesus says, mythical legend is created around their names and they become everlasting memories for man. In their action these heroes display two primary instincts of human nature to which the ‘Tiefenpsychologie’ (psychology of the depths) has paid special attention: aggressiveness and the will to power (Nietzsche’s ‘Wille zur Macht’)].

⁷⁵ Note the ironic and unexpected contiguity of the name of the goddess, Diana the Huntress, with that of a north-German industrial town and the fact that the heaviness of the ship makes it unfit for any other activity beyond being “the faithful nurse of Hermann’s progeny”.

a Capuchin's beard" – Conrad 1992: 206), that makes the recollection of his past cannibalistic behaviour hardly bearable for him.⁷⁶

Even the girl, Hermann's niece (the object of Falk's desire), with her statuesque bodily perfection can hardly be seen as the appropriate surrogate of the intrepid and independent Diana the Huntress, for she contents herself with chasing Hermann's children and putting them to bed.⁷⁷ Not even her extreme physical beauty and the aura of mystery that even denies her a proper name redeems her from her housewifely, subdued and dependent condition. Endlessly busy in sewing (a job she appropriately carries out with downcast eyes) she reminds one more of Penelope although she lacks the essential voluntary self-denial that gives Ulysses' wife the distinction of a character weaving her own destiny. Though, like Penelope, she is also immersed in a patriarchal context, hers is a much more radically passive attitude that turns her literally into an object, an ornament (when viewed by the narrator): "she made no noise but she filled most satisfactorily a good bit of space" (Conrad 1992: 193).⁷⁸ So here again we are faced with a debasement of heroic figures and situations.

⁷⁶ In relation to Falk it should also be noted that in him other literary and epistemological associations converge: from Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*) to Darwinian hero; he is equally seen by the narrator as a model of genuine masculinity (Conrad 1992: 213 and 215). Later on Conrad recognized a damaging quality to this character's surplus of meaning: "I wanted to make him stand for so much that I neglected, in a manner, to set him on his feet. This is one of my weaknesses..." (Conrad 1990: vol.2, 441).

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that in blatant contrast with hunting for food (as primeval man or as Falk on board the *Borgmester Dahl*), modern hunts are no longer determined by hunger but by money or financial considerations. Several examples occur in the text: the narrator (with Hermann's help) runs after the Chinese steward who had robbed him of his money; he chases Johnson trying to persuade him to tow his ship for him and thus avoid human and material losses; notice also Johnson's native wife hunting "on all fours a silver dollar" her husband is tossing up in the air; finally, the *Borgmester Dahl* is said to have been "sent off to hunt for her luck".

⁷⁸ One could say that she corresponds more accurately to a characteristic masculine ideal of femininity or stereotype still operative in our culture: she is passive, virginal, still and beautiful, inviting even metaphorical abduction and rape (when Falk impetuously tows her uncle's ship out of harbour). In this sense the story could be read as an attempt on Conrad's part to recover a lost maleness, to redefine the male hero, an enterprise

I have already alluded to the insularity of Hermann's ship which the narrator characterizes as "world-proof" and immune to the corruption of society at large. He even refers to it as a sacred retreat or "sanctuary". But the text proves that behind the mask of domestic, arcadian innocence and venerable respectability, there is, after all, the same materialistic and utilitarian ethos that pervades both land and sea.⁷⁹ The portrait of the ship that is given us later on in the text is clearly removed from the religious enthusiasm that inspired the narrator in his earlier description:

And *Diana* the ship sat, high walled and as solid as an institution, on the smooth level of the water, the most uninspiring and respectable craft upon the seas, *useful and ugly, devoted to the support of domestic virtues like any grocer's shop on shore.* (Conrad 1992: 212, emphasis added)

The imagery is in keeping with its owner's gradual disclosure of his own inducements. Wholly absorbed by "domestic arrangements" and financial considerations that supersede both his affections and his scruples, Hermann's hypocrisy is clearly shown in his behaviour towards Falk and his niece. His readiness to give her over in marriage to a man he views as a murderer and a "beast", whom he says he despises and thinks unfit for his own daughter, shows how anxious he is to get rid of her for the simple reason that she has ceased to be useful on board and has instead become a financial burden. When the narrator eventually understands his true reasons and gives his game away by denouncing the use he has put his niece to for ten years as "not a bad bargain", the hollowness of Hermann's respectability and "civic virtue" is made clear:

significantly undermined by the characteristic suppression of the female. Conrad is once again obviously working inside the system, inside the symbolical order that dominates our culture. Once more in his fiction the female figure, silenced and almost paralyzed, is merely the means for the affirmation of the masculine hero. For a development of women's instrumental role in marriage see Pierre Bourdieu (1990, especially pp. 26-27).

⁷⁹ As to the utilitarian ethos, f.i., it should be noted that everybody in the story seems to be making use of somebody else: Hermann holding up the narrator as a rival to Falk as a means of pressing the latter to a decisive attitude towards his niece; Falk bribing Johnson against the narrator; the narrator using Falk's need for him as "ambassador" to Hermann as a means of getting his own ship to sea.

Far from taking offense, he resumed his air of civic virtue. (...). The night came upon him and buried in haste his whiskers, his globular eyes, his puffy pale face, his fat knees and the vast flat slippers on his fatherly feet. *Only his short arms in respectable white shirt-sleeves remained very visible*, propped up like the flippers of a seal reposing upon the strand. (Conrad 1992: 216, emphasis added)

The Dickensian humorous strain can no longer hide the fact paradoxically disclosed by the night: Hermann's presence amounts to no more than the diminished image of his preposterous "short arms in respectable white shirt sleeves", endlessly and insensitively reckoning gains and losses. Previously diminished to the dimensions of a "caricature of a shopkeeping citizen in one of his own German comic papers" (Conrad 1992: 192), the text significantly affords him no more than the importance of domestic metaphors⁸⁰ and only allows him to rule "pontifically" over a couple of submissive women and a "gang of four children".

In the end, however, Hermann is subjected to a much more devastating comparison. The thinness and artificial conventionality of his life and motives are confronted by Falk's elemental needs, imperative moves and stubborn "manly" frankness. Whereas Falk invests whatever he does with the intensity of his own vitality and "the singleness of one instinct" – his will to live, Hermann performs his duties with the mechanical assuredness of dull, daily routine. So that even the latter's daily struggle for survival seems derisive even when confronted with Falk's ruthless monopolism in exercising his trade. This, I suggest, can be read as a sign of Falk's capacity to fit in, without cynicism or after-thought, any situation he faces.⁸¹ Living in a society dominated "by economic cannibalism"⁸² Falk shows he belongs to the fittest by adopting the

⁸⁰ As, f.i., in: "Hermann's excitement suddenly went off the boil as when you remove a saucepan from the fire" (Conrad 1992: 193).

⁸¹ As Ian Watt (1980: 156) suggested, the influence of Herbert Spencer's reading of Darwin's theories in sociological terms is inescapable in Conrad. Bruce Johnson (1965: 278) also calls attention to Darwin's influence in "Falk" and Redmond O'Hanlon (1984) discusses this influence extensively in his *Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin*.

⁸² Paul Kirschner's expression in his "Introduction" to the volume (1992: 16).

best possible position to ensure his survival – an attitude closely resembling the “cunning”, “endurance” and “pitiless resolution” displayed when hunting the carpenter.

By repudiating Falk’s frankness upon confessing his cannibalism, Hermann shows how unwilling he is to face or acknowledge the naked truth, preferring instead to clothe it in sentimental lies.⁸³ Hermann’s case thus diagnoses what happens to men in middle-class marriage: they lose their maleness and become weakened at the hands of women (Hermann’s name reads unavoidably as “her man”).

The bourgeois order softens and mollifies feelings, sanitizes life, covers nakedness with clothes and substitutes superficial sentimentalism for true, deep emotions felt in the body. Our last impression of Hermann is that of a domesticated specimen, emasculated by petty considerations, caught up in the vicious circle of his daily routine. The opposition so far sustained in the text between Falk and Hermann could thus induce us to read this short story as Conrad’s answer not only to his life predicament but also to a growing feeling of manly insecurity in evidence at the turn of the century.⁸⁴ Falk would, in this context, be seen as the alternative to Hermann, an attempt to recover lost manhood: a sort of lawrentian hero. The problem here is that seen as such, the character is unconvincing. In fact his corruption by money values (that contaminate all spheres of social activity)⁸⁵ and mechanization is made obvious throughout the text. There is, moreover, something undeveloped and childish in Falk which determines his basic amorality and his strength and which gives a certain grandeur to his frankness but which, simultaneously, is the source of a fatal weakness: his “desire of respectability, of being like everybody else”. This need to fit in society, to be respected, to become one with others, undermines his position as Hermann’s opposite and makes him a vulnerable prey to the

⁸³ Here one should bear in mind the ending of *Heart of Darkness* and Marlow’s lie to the Intended.

⁸⁴ One of the crisis of masculinity of which Elyzabeth Badinter (1992) tells us about.

⁸⁵ A significant displacement occurs in the text when the narrator finds bills inside an otherwise empty violin-case and verses filling in the pages of the account-book – a contamination of art by money is thus significantly suggested.

social order and to the values his cannibalism so outrageously has challenged. The same will to live, the same Darwinian fitness that had determined both his pitiless monopolism and his survival on board the *Borgmester Dahl*, dictates a final gesture of double meaning. His "hunger for the girl" can be read in two different ways. In a lawrentian vein as the triumph of repressed bodily life and vitality, still active in all those whose connection with the cosmos has not yet been completely severed. This undoubtedly is the reading intended by the narrator when he gives us a last glimpse of the couple embracing in the sun, impervious to what surrounds them. But equally inescapable is the way in which he brings the text to an end. The reference to them in the last paragraph of the story as "Mr. and Mrs. Falk", one more bourgeois couple (in the image of Mr. and Mrs. Hermann) scared away from the place by Schomberg's false story which threatens to blemish their respectability, destroys all the reader's illusions as to the actual strength of their indifference to society or as to the symbolic power the text has ascribed them as characters.⁸⁶

The absurdity of the story, after all, lies in Falk's final absorption into the bourgeois world whose moral values his cannibalism (and sexual bravado) seemed to have defied. The great mouth meticulously brushed everyday, which had served as a metaphor for Hermann's ship (Conrad 1992: 174), in its turn a metaphor for middle-class society, marriage and ethos, should now be invoked as performing the last act of cannibalism in this text: for being capable of devouring and assimilating even the most dissimilar and defying elements, it thus proves to be the true cannibal in Conrad's story.

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⁸⁶ As Conrad acknowledged in one of his letters of the period to a friend: "we can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it." (Conrad 1990: vol.2, 30).

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Words as Game: The Writing and Reading of Poetry⁸⁷

⁸⁷ This paper was first published in *Anglo-Saxónica, Revista do Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa* Série II, 26 (2008): 137-152.

L'artiste (...) sait que rien n'est simple et que l'autre existe.
Albert Camus, «Témoignage de la liberté» (November 1948)

The writer as hunter

Some time ago I had to make a selection of texts to include in a textbook for a literary propaedeutics with a view to illustrating one of the discussion items in the programme, namely, the peculiar relation writers in general and poets in particular, hold with language. My purpose was to make students aware of the contrast Jean-Paul Sartre established back in 1948 between the poet's attitude to language and that of the common speaker. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre writes:

En fait, le poète s'est retiré d'un seul coup du langage-instrument; il a choisi une fois pour toutes l'attitude poétique qui considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes. Car l'ambiguïté du signe implique qu'on puisse à son gré le traverser comme une vitre et poursuivre à travers lui la chose signifiée ou tourner son regard vers sa *réalité* et le considérer comme objet. L'homme qui parle est au-delà des mots, près de l'objet; le poète est en deçà. Pour le premier, ils sont domestiques; pour le second ils restent à l'état sauvage. Pour celui-là, ce sont des conventions utiles, des outils qui s'usent peu à peu et qu'on jette quand ils ne peuvent plus servir; pour le second, ce sont des choses naturelles qui croissent naturellement sur la terre comme l'herbe et les arbres. (Sartre 1948: 18)

The instrumental attitude of the speaker in relation to language here, is contrasted with the poet's in metaphorical terms that, at a certain point, rely on the distinction between domestic and wild as applied to words, implicitly likened to animals («Pour le premier [l'homme qui parle], ils sont *domestiques*;

pour le second [le poète] ils restent *à l'état sauvage* » – my emphasis). In my search for texts (both in verse and prose, and written both by Portuguese and English writers and critics) to illustrate and discuss this issue, I was surprised to find the recurrent metaphor of words as wild game the writer had to chase and capture. So much so that in my textbook there came to be a section containing poems and parts of essays that you could aptly call “On Hunting.” I will give you some examples before focusing on the one I have selected for my talk today. Let me start with an essayistic text. The critic Manuel Poppe, for instance, commenting on artistic activity in general writes: «O artista é um caçador de palavras, de cores, de símbolos. E, muitas vezes, um esbanjador e um caçador frustrado. Nem todas as palavras, nem todos os símbolos servem.» (1996: 52)⁸⁸

Twentieth-century poets as diverse as Ruy Belo, Eugénio de Andrade, Alexandre O’Neill and Carlos de Oliveira have written on this hunting activity in various tones and styles. Let us take Oliveira’s short poem, entitled «Vento» (“Wind”). There we read:

As palavras
cintilam
na floresta do sono
e o seu rumor
de corças perseguidas
ágil e esquivo
como o vento
fala de amor
e solidão:
quem vos ferir
não fere em vão,
palavras. (Oliveira 2004: 192)⁸⁹

⁸⁸ “The artist is a hunter of words, of colours, of symbols. And he is often a spendthrift and a frustrated hunter. Not every word, not every symbol suits him.” All translations are mine, unless otherwise signalled.

⁸⁹ “The words / twinkle /in sleep’s forest /and their whisper / whirring by as does in the chase / agile and wild / like the wind / speaks of love / and loneliness: / whoever hurts you, / won’t hurt in vain, / words.”

Eugénio de Andrade, for his part, complains that words obey him much less now than they used to in the past: «obedecem-me agora muito menos, / as palavras,» he says in «Agora as palavras» (“Now Words”), a poem where he implicitly likens them to animals that react against his previous “short leash” («rédea curta»); fortunately or unfortunately enough he seems to prefer the most capricious of them all, those that resist him most. He concludes his poem with a question: «Ou será que / já só procuro as mais encabritadas?» (“Or is it that / I only look for the most capricious?”) (Andrade 2005: 527-528).

In the case of Ruy Belo, even though his intimacy with words would apparently allow him to cast himself in the role of a “word tamer” («domador de palavras»), he knows better and recognises words’ ascendancy and their power over him. In his prose poem «Não sei nada» (“I know nothing”), referring to words, he writes: «Mas só eu – eu e os meus irmãos – sei em que medida sou eu que sou domado por elas. A iniciativa pertence-lhes. São elas que conduzem o meu trenó sem chicote, nem rédeas, nem caminho determinado antes da grande aventura» (Belo 2000: 258-59).⁹⁰ This ironic role reversal, however, should not blind us to the challenge posed by words to the poet and the way in which, most of the time, instead of reducing him to passivity they trigger in him the need to react and give them chase.

In another instance, words are seen as being sick, as in O’Neill’s poem entitled “Sick animals” («Animais doentes»), and it is the poet’s role to heal them and bring them to life again. He sees them as all sorts of animals from insects, such as wasps, ants or grasshoppers to sheep or doves, lizards or even “stupid, commonplace chicken” (O’Neill 2000: 82).⁹¹ Here it is not so much the poet as hunter as the poet as healer that is at stake.

As can be deduced from the examples given (and I can assure you that I could multiply them if need be)⁹², one should ponder on this widespread

⁹⁰ “But only I – I and my brothers – know how far I am indeed tamed by them. The initiative is theirs. They drive my sleigh without whip or reins, or a predetermined route before the great adventure.”

⁹¹ «estúpidas galinhas corriqueiras.»

⁹² Another way of referring to words metaphorically is associating them with women the poet has to pursue, another type of “hunt.” This is the case with Portuguese poet Manuel Alegre in poems like the 9th in his book *Com que Pena: Vinte poemas para Camões*

insistence on words as animals and the poet as their hunter, as a metaphor for expressing the writer's obsession with language as his prime material – something to be both admired and tamed, chased and captured or possessed. Maybe it is no accident that all my examples come from male writers. As far as my research went I could not find similar poems written by women. No wonder, since hunting is traditionally a predominantly masculine activity. Another topic for further research and another paper, then, would be to look for the metaphors used by women writers when referring to their privileged relation with language...

But it is now time to turn your attention to the English poet I have included in this section of my textbook on poets as hunters. As many of you may have guessed by now the one I have in mind is Ted Hughes and his poem, "The Thought-Fox." It so happens that besides being an adequate illustration of the poet as a hunter, the poem also functions at other important levels and helps us understand other issues involved in the creation and the reading of poetry, thus outwitting the Portuguese poems so far alluded to and allowing me to make students aware of those other issues as well.

Creating the other: Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox"

A lot has been written on this most famous of Hughes's poems and I won't pretend to say anything particularly new, unless to the extent that I will use it for a reading that, in the environment of a literary propaedeutics class, aims at illustrating the concepts of literary production and reception together with the relevance of language for both.

One of the most striking features of this text is the fact that while it stages the poet in the act of writing the poem it also invites a performative reading⁹³ of it that highlights the essence of the reading process as essentially creative and shows how reading is the symmetrical counterpart of writing. In other words, it calls attention to reading as a sort of "mimetic practice," as Geoffrey

(1992: 25). The same had already occurred in his poem «As Palavras» in the earlier *O canto e as armas* (1974: 122).

⁹³ I here take the notion of performative reading in the sense developed by Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004: especially pp. 95-106).

Galt Harpham (2006) has recently put it, whereby through an imaginative effort the reader tries “to grasp the process by which this particular text came to be” (Harpham 2006: 9). If indeed Hughes’s poem can be experienced as, to use Derek Attridge’s words: “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (...) of writing that brought it into being” (Attridge 2004: 59), then what confronts us in this text is a staging of the singularity of the literary work as it has been described by Attridge in his latest book, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). This is precisely what I will try to illustrate through my reading of “The Thought-Fox.”

The first line of the poem clearly states its starting point, by emphasizing the originating imaginative act that creates it. The opening words, “I imagine,” are the unequivocal statement of a deliberate creative act. The rest of the line: “this midnight moment’s forest” – being the object of the initial verbal clause, already curiously fuses the realistic setting of creation, “this midnight moment,” with the created setting where the imagined action will take place, the “forest.” Moreover, by insisting on a certain inescapable alliterative pattern: “**imagine... midnight moment’s**” interlocked with: “midnight moment’s forest”, the language reinforces the sense that we are both witnessing the author’s act of writing and co-creating its product, by immediately visualizing a forest, thus figuring ourselves as actively contributing to the emergence of the text as an imagined other. Therefore when we reach the second line: “Something else is alive,” we are willing to receive and host this unknown presence that, by its liveliness, seems to compensate for the environmental conditions of the creative act, aptly characterised by an overall sense of absence or loss: “the clock’s loneliness,” the “blank page,” “the window” with “no star.” Yet, at this stage, the poet’s presence is still there to be reckoned with by the reader: actively, in the movement of his fingers (“this blank page where *my* fingers move” – my emphasis), a sign of liveliness that is significantly aligned with the aliveness of “something else,” but also, in a more passive way, in the expectant attitude of looking through the window (“through the window *I* see no star” – my emphasis),⁹⁴ as though waiting for the arrival of some external entity.

⁹⁴ According to Attridge (2004: 23), there is an element of passivity in the creation of the other.

Noticeable also is how the blankness of the page is echoed in the starless window, thus mixing the space of the text with that of its context, in still another fusion of planes.

But when we reach the sixth line of the poem: “Something more near,” we lose sight of the author’s presence and confidently accept the verbal and imaginative game that invites us to mentally rehearse the gradual approach of a newcomer. The apparent paradox in “more near / though deeper within darkness” is still a reminder that we are invited to inhabit two planes simultaneously: that of the external darkness of the night which has been described as the immediate context of the poetic subject and that of “the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet’s imagination in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring” (Webster 1984: 2).

But by the third stanza it is not only the figment of the author’s and our imagination that “is entering the loneliness,” we as readers have been caught up in the verbal and imaginative game that the text has led us to endorse: we are also decidedly “entering the loneliness” as well, and fully prepared for an encounter. At first the reader is denied full visual contact with the other being. The adjective, followed by an adverb, plus simile (whose first term is still missing) – “Cold, delicately as the dark snow,” all tend to postpone the moment of recognition, and when the subject is finally revealed it is still elusive, only “a fox’s nose.” But its reality is nevertheless strongly suggested by the gentle, cautious movement of its cold nose as it twitches against “twig” and “leaf.” As Richard Webster has aptly noticed: “by inverting the natural order of the simile, and withholding the subject of the sentence, the poet succeeds in blurring its distinctness so that the fox emerges only slowly out of formlessness, leading the shadowy movement of its body as it comes closer” (Webster 1984: 2). After the nose, come the eyes but again these are not presences in themselves, nor do they define the animal’s form but rather, like the nose, they are subsidiary to underlining the body movement, still cautious and rhythmically slow though sure: “Two eyes serve a movement, that now / And again now, and now, and now // Sets neat prints into the snow /Between trees,...”. The decisive alliteration of “t” combined with “n” (also reinforced by assonances), contributes towards defining and stressing the broken cadence that characterises the clear imprinting of the animal’s paws on the snow, one after the other, a movement and a rhythm also supported by the punctuation

and the line-endings.⁹⁵

These lines are also intimately linked by the rhyme, but the rhyme-scheme suddenly collapses thus miming an abrupt change in the progression of the animal: "...and warily a lame / Shadow lags by stump and in hollow / Of a body..." It is as if the fox, hesitantly, has suddenly slowed down its course – and here the adverb "warily" together with the alliterated "l" in significant words as "lame" and "lags" decisively check the onward progressive rhythm of the previous lines. The suspicion inherent in this new retarded rhythm is also suggested by the clandestine connotation of the word "shadow". The fox, or what we sense of it, has stopped to check the terrain before boldly darting forward through a clearing: "... a **body** that is **bold** to come // Across clearings, ..." – the rhythm has suddenly accelerated again, the quick recurrence of alliterated sounds stamping the rapid cadence of a deliberate run. It is as though we've glimpsed the lightning appearance of the fox's body, suddenly shooting across a clearing in the forest, the gap between the stanzas being itself the prosodic equivalent of the clearing which the fox, after a wary hesitation, will then quickly cross.⁹⁶

But already the length of a word like "clearings" anticipates a new step in the poem, marked by a sequence of words longer than before: "...an eye, / A widening, deepening greenness, / Brilliantly, concentratedly, / Coming about its own business." Our eye is now zooming in and as the words become longer the targeted eye becomes larger, more vivid and seems to advance towards us, in a movement that is surer than ever.

This expansive highly visual, chromatic movement almost threatens to engulf us, but again the last stanza introduces a sequence of brief, incisive

⁹⁵ Curiously, in one of his two "Myth and Education" papers, Hughes compares his own method for writing poetry to that of musical composition: "The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented – the poem is finished" (Faas 1980: 163).

⁹⁶ I found this idea of the correspondence between the stanza-break and the clearing in the imagined forest in Webster (1984: 3).

words marked by sharp alliterative effects and a staccato rhythm: “Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox / It enters the dark hole of the head.” There’s no escape, the fox’s unmistakable smell is upon us. It was too quick for us: we’re caught! As though mesmerized by the vivid, shining greenness of the fox’s eyes, we’ve inadvertently slackened alertness and were off our guard, at the mercy of this unexpected onslaught. The last two lines, however, break the spell, calling us back to reality, reintroducing the familiar images of the beginning: “The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed.” We’re back at the poet’s room, where the clock is still ticking, and outside everything is also the same: the window remains “starless still.” “The page”, however, “is printed.” The prints in the snow have become the printed page, the fox is ensnared (or released?) in the lair (or is it the trap?) of the poem. “The fox is the poem, and the poem is the fox” (Webster 1984: 3).

The reader as prey and rescuer

In performing the text in this way, I hope to have shown how the reader here has been prey to a linguistic game that to a certain extent renders him powerless against the final onslaught of the fox/poem, but also how, without the specific act of imaginative cooperation triggered in him by the language of the text which he feels compelled to endorse and whose effects he undergoes, the poem/fox would never come into being. The act of reading is then defined simultaneously as the passive perception of the work and its creation. Again, Sartre calls our attention to this double edge of reading:

La lecture, en effet, semble la synthèse de la perception et de la création; elle pose à la fois l’essentialité du sujet et celle de l’objet; l’objet est essentiel parce qu’il est rigoureusement transcendant, qu’il impose ses structures propres et qu’on doit l’attendre et l’observer; mais le sujet est essentiel aussi parce qu’il est requis non seulement pour dévoiler (c’est-à-dire faire qu’il y ait un objet) mais encore pour ce que cet objet *soit* absolument (c’est-à-dire pour le produire). En un mot, le lecteur a conscience de dévoiler et de créer à la fois, de dévoiler en créant, de créer par dévoilement. (Sartre 1948: 55)

The interesting thing about this is how both movements are inextricably interrelated, how, by my act of endorsing the words of the text, by my act of disinterested generosity or genuine hospitality to this other’s language, by my

readiness to undergo its effects, I become the subject of its creation as I perform it. It is precisely this double movement of turning the reader into both passive spectator and active creator that Hughes's poem sets into motion, so much so that by the end of it, the pertinent question which comes to mind is: Who is it that was caught, then, the reader or the fox, both or none?

"The Thought-Fox" stages the emergence of the other in a literary work, in this case, metaphorically represented by the fox, as the product of an act of creation performed at the same time by both writer and reader. Both have their allotted roles to play and they play them in close interdependence in Hughes's poem. The writer's skilful handling of words unavoidably engages the reader in a linguistic experience, a progressive experience that demands cognitive, emotional, and physical responses, thus implicating him fully in the creative process described by the poem from the start. The other that is gradually created along the lines of the poem is the product of the creative act the poet has launched. For his part, by vividly concentrating in or reliving his past experience with foxes, the author is both faithfully responding to memories and previous experienced sensations⁹⁷ and, at the same time, by using newly found words, images, rhythms, alliterative effects, etc, he is creating it anew, thus giving rise to an unprecedented image of the fox and, therefore, to an entirely new or inventive text.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Cf. Ted Hughes's essay "Capturing Animals" in his *Poetry in the Making* (1967: 15-35). Keith Sagar, a specialist on Hughes's work who was also a friend of the poet, argued that the origin of the poem was a real life episode that took place during the poet's childhood: "When Hughes was a schoolboy in Mexborough he would often set off at dawn and walk along a stretch of the river where the soft soil between the tree roots had been scooped out by the river in spate, leaving a series of humps and hollows. He found that if he crept up the side of one of the humps very quietly and peeped over, he might 'catch' some wildlife in the next hollow. One time, unknown to him, as he crept up one side of a hump, a fox was creeping up the other side. They arrived at the top simultaneously, and gazed into each other's eyes from a distance of about nine inches. After a split second, which could have been an eternity, the fox fled. But for that second it felt as though the intense being of the fox had entered his head, displacing, shouldering out, his own weaker, provisional, sense of selfhood." (Quoted from private correspondence between Keith Sagar and myself).

⁹⁸ Attridge's notion of verbal creation should be invoked here: "[I]t is a handling of language whereby something we might call 'otherness' or 'alterity', or 'the other', is made,

In *Poetry in the Making*, a collection of essays published in 1967, Ted Hughes significantly alludes to his poetry writing in terms explicitly identified with hunting:

The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clear final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own. (Hughes 1967: 17)

Himself a hunter in his youth, he further explains how he started writing poetry when his enthusiasm for capturing animals started to abate, and how he became convinced that the two activities were somehow similar:

You might not think that these two interests, capturing animals and writing poems, have much in common. But the more I think back the more sure I am that with me the two interests have been one interest (...) In a way, I suppose, I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. (Hughes 1967: 15)

This vulnerability of animals and poems is precisely what becomes apparent in our reading of the text, where the precarious though vivid emergence of the sketchy fox is one of the things the reader registers: reduced to the dimension of merely “something”, a “nose”, “two eyes”, a “lame shadow”, “a body”, “an eye” and finally “a sudden sharp hot stink”, the fox is from the start in serious danger of becoming no more than prints on a page, forever imprisoned in the mere sounds and shapes of printed words – no more than the sign of an absence.⁹⁹

or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual’s mental world” (Attridge 2004: 19).

⁹⁹ Attridge calls attention to this formal side inherent in literature but at the same time to the way in which it should be viewed primarily not so much as a static entity (“empirical structure”) but rather as a dialogical one (“performed mobility”): “Clearly, the literary work involves a great deal more than form but it is as written form – which is to say as the encrypted image of an act-event of invention, waiting to be re-enacted in a reading

It is here that the role of the reader becomes crucial. For, as Derek Attridge has recognised, the pertinent obligation the reader has towards the text is not to look for its immanent meaning but the challenge is rather: “how best to perform a text’s engagement with linguistic power” (Attridge 2004: 98).

This performative or performing character of the reading process which involves awareness and an individual’s experience of the specific sequence of words found in the poem is what constitutes for Attridge the essence of literary reading as an inherently creative act that responds and corresponds to the act-event of literary writing. An act that occurs each time a reader, any proficient reader, takes up a text and by performing its language creates it anew and is him/herself somehow affected by this experience. And here lies the ethical dimension of reading in general and of criticism in particular, since it presupposes an ability to attend and respond to the demands made upon the reader by the text as other. The reader then becomes responsible for it, in the sense of being obliged to fully respond, accommodate and nurture that which is not familiar and welcome it as such, without trying to translate it into totally known terms, but rather registering its resistance and irreducibility. The recalcitrant otherness of the fox is exactly what the reader of the poem is made to experience through his/her performing of the text’s language. And this is the reason why, by the end of it, s/he no longer knows whether his/her is an active or a passive role, whether s/he is the hunter or the prey. For in reading both dimensions are simultaneously present: you have to succumb, to let-go, *and* to create, to let-go *in order to* create.¹⁰⁰

The fox as other, created by Hughes’s poem and by its readers’ performance of it, is at once challenging and vulnerable – its power, like literature’s power, lies in its frailty, since without readers the fox will for ever remain in

– that it identifies itself as literature” (Attridge 2004: 111). Without readers and the reading process, the fox risks being simply “encrypted image” or prints on a page.

¹⁰⁰ As Harpham has argued: “... every critical act includes an experience of creative freedom, the experience of ‘moving forward in unanticipated ways’. It is the distinctive combination of its obligations – to accuracy, fidelity, and veritable truth on the one hand, and speculation, imagination, interpretive freedom, and creation on the other – that produces the character of criticism” (Harpham 2006: 9).

captivity.¹⁰¹ This was exactly what Ted Hughes had in mind in this other passage taken from *Poetry in the Making*: “And I suppose that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them” (Hughes 1967: 20).

The reader here is seen implicitly as indispensable for responding to and accommodating the otherness of the fox and thereby granting it its wildness and preventing its domestication.¹⁰² By realizing and sustaining the fox’s otherness, the reader is thus seen as the instance that enables the fox to be released from captivity and given back to freedom, to the teeming wilderness of the poet’s and the reader’s imagination because: “(...) it is in this apprehension of otherness and in the demands it makes that the peculiar pleasure of the literary response (...) is to be experienced”; “[L]iterature for all the force which it is capable of exercising can achieve nothing without readers – responsible readers (...)” (Attridge 2004: 131).

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¹⁰¹ Contrary to Webster’s argument, I do not believe that Hughes’s fox is characterised by “deadness”, as opposed, for instance, to the alleged aliveness of D. H. Lawrence’s creatures in his animal poetry (cf. Webster 1984: 4). Rather it is Hughes’s specific achievement (a step ahead of Lawrence) to realize in this extraordinary poem the peculiar nature of literary creation and literary reading, by giving us an unforgettable vivid portrait of a fox that comes alive every time we take up the poem and read it.

¹⁰² Attridge defines “otherness” precisely as that which defies or “prohibit[s] appropriation and domestication” (Attridge 2004: 125).

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Matisse and Women: Portraits by A. S. Byatt¹⁰³

¹⁰³ This paper was first published in *Writing and Seeing: Essays on Word and Image*. (2006).
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The subject of a picture and its background have the same value, or, to put it more clearly, there is no principal feature.

Henri Matisse, "On Modernism and Tradition" (1935)

What frightens me is that I'm going to have my interest taken away by women who see literature as a source of interest in women. I don't need that. I'm interested in women anyway. Literature has always been my way out, my escape from the limits of being female.

A.S. Byatt in Janet Todd, *Women Writers Talking* (1983)

Introduction

As a starting point for my approach to A. S. Byatt's book *The Matisse Stories* (published in 1993) I have chosen Henri Matisse's own dictum that: "the subject of a picture and its background have the same value or, to put it more clearly, there is no principal feature" (Matisse 1935, as cited by Flam 1995: 120).¹⁰⁴

The recognition of a relationship between subject and background that dissolves a previously accepted hierarchy, disperses our gaze and thus creates a new perception of the pictorial space can, I think, be usefully transposed to our reading of Byatt's volume of stories.

For this transposition to be operative, I will have to translate the terms of the pictorial equation into literary terms. I will therefore identify the pictorial "subject" with the obvious thematic content of the text(s), whereas I will equate the "background" with those extraneous aspects such as the graphic layout, the peripheral elements that help to frame the text proper¹⁰⁵ (which I will call

¹⁰⁴ A good example of the equal importance attributed by Matisse to "background" and "subject" would be his *Harmonie en rouge* (*Harmony in Red*) (1908).

¹⁰⁵ For my use of the term "text" see Aguiar e Silva (1990: 185-188).

the “peritext”, following Genette 1987: 10)¹⁰⁶ and its structural divisions (into parts and chapters or, in this instance, into stories). I would like to suggest that in the case of Byatt’s book (as in the case of Matisse’s painting) both types of elements: external or peripheral and internal or textual, are of similar relevance and that we should bear in mind the nature of their relationships as a means of better understanding Byatt’s achievement.

The “Background”

Let us first consider the graphic and peritextual features of the front and back covers of Byatt’s book. The front cover (Fig. 1) reproduces one of Matisse’s paintings, *Le silence habité des maisons* (*The Inhabited Silence of Houses*) (1947) upon a bright blue background and bears the title at the top, *The Matisse Stories* (the name of the painter standing out as an autograph in larger, bolder letters and almost visually “dancing” against the blue). Beneath the reproduction of the painting, the writer’s name, A. S. Byatt, appears in a lettering that suggests continuity with part of the title at the top, namely, *The... Stories*, thus making a partition clear: the “stories” belong to Byatt, whereas the impressive yellow signature of the painter goes with the golden hues of his painting, thus unequivocally signalling its authorship.

If we now consider the back cover, we still have the same blue background with two more paintings by Matisse, namely, one at the top (a bit to the right), *Le nu rose* (*Pink Nude*) (1935) and one at the bottom (slightly to the left), *La porte noire* (*The Black Door*) (1942). Having read the stories, we know that each of these paintings is referred to in and is more intimately related to each of the stories inside: *Le nu rose* with “Medusa’s Ankles”, *Le silence habité des maisons* with “Art Work”, and *La porte noire* with “The Chinese Lobster”¹⁰⁷. However, when we turn the pages of this book we will be surprised to find

¹⁰⁶ According to Genette (1987: 10), the “peritext” includes titles, subtitles, prefaces, dedications, epigraphs, titles of chapters, notes, etc..

¹⁰⁷ The English titles of Matisse’s paintings were taken from Watkins (1998). In the case of *Le silence habité des maisons*, however, I would prefer *The Inhabited Silence of Houses* to *The Lived-in Silence of Houses*, following Byatt’s own “suggestion” in the quotation from “Art Work” below.

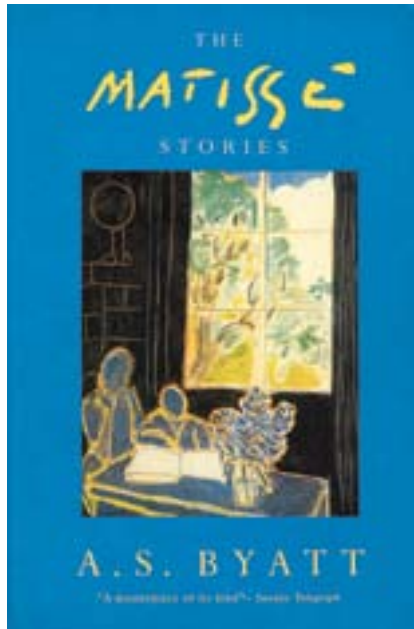


Fig. 1 – Frontcover of Byatt’s book

before each story and on its title page, a reproduction of a Matisse drawing (thus doubling the number of visual referents for each narrative): *La chevelure (Hair)* (1931-32) announces Susannah’s experiences and final outburst of rage and despair at the hairdresser’s salon; *L’artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir (The Artist and his Model Reflected in the Mirror)* (1937) hints at the self-reflexive nature of the middle story (appropriately called “Art Work”), where, as we shall see, duplications are central; *Nymph et faune (Nymph and Faun)* (1931-32) connotes a predatory sexuality that haunts the universe of the last story.

The dedication, coming immediately after the title page, reads: “For Peter Who taught me to look at things slowly. With love.” It calls attention to the importance of the act of careful perception in relation to life (and art) in general and it comes as a sort of indirect reminder to the reader of the need to apply

to these stories a “slow look” as synonymous of a close reading. For this reason it can be linked to the contents of the picture on the front cover where the act of reading is central, since *Le silence habité des maisons* represents two people (one adult – presumably the mother..., and one child) reading a big blank book propped on a table.

The fact that it is precisely this painting that is ekphrastically evoked¹⁰⁸ at the outset of the middle story (a story that reflects upon artistic creativity, artistic production, its nature, aims and constraints) further reinforces the centrality of the act of reading and of Matisse’s haunting presence as predecessor and inspiring figure. Therefore it comes as no surprise that, following the narrator’s description of this picture, we have what could be considered a wonderful display of verbal and narrative virtuosity in prose segments that constitute the equivalent linguistic rendering of another domestic interior peopled by unseen human presences (at first, as devoid of features as Matisse’s two figures). Here, Byatt resorts to the suggestive reference to various sounds and to the use of onomatopoeic sounds themselves in order to create an atmosphere and, by doing so, she is indirectly calling attention to the differences between her own medium – sounds and words, and Matisse’s art of colours, lines and forms.¹⁰⁹

There is an inhabited silence in 49 Alma Road, in the sense that there are no voices, though there are various sounds, some of them even pervasive and raucous sounds, which an unconcerned ear might construe as the background din of a sort of silence. There is the churning hum of the

¹⁰⁸ Though I do not ignore more recent developments in the theory and concept of *ekphrasis*, I am here using the word in the sense defined by Heffernan (1991) as the verbal representation of a graphic representation. For a discussion of Heffernan’s view and an account of other contributions to a more operative and updated definition see Conrado (1996: 46-62).

¹⁰⁹ On Byatt’s self-consciousness of her own art a lot has been written. I could here quote some critics (like Kenyon 1988 and Todd 1997) but I prefer to quote from the opening paragraph of her own *Portraits in Fiction*: “Portraits in words and portraits in paint are opposites, rather than metaphors for each other. [...] A portrait in a novel or a story may be a portrait of invisible things. [...] Even the description in visual language of a face or body may depend on being unseen for its force” (Byatt 2002: 1).

washing-machine, a kind of splashy mechanical giggle, with a grinding note in it, tossing its wet mass one way, resting and simmering, tossing it the other.

.....
In the front room, chanting to itself, for no one is watching it, the television is full on in midmorning. Not loudly, there are rules about noise. The noise it is making is the wilfully upbeat cheery squitter of female presenters of children's TV, accented with regular, repetitive amazement, mixed in with the grunts and crackles and high-pitched squeaks of a flock of furry puppets (...)

.....
On the first floor, behind a closed door, the circular rush and swish of Jamie's electric trains can be heard. Nothing can be heard of Natasha's record-player, and Natasha cannot hear the outside world, for her whole head is stuffed with beating vibrations and exploding howls and ululations. She lies on her bed and twitches in rhythm.

.....
From Debbie's room comes the sound of the typewriter. It is an old mechanical typewriter, its noises are metallic and clicking. It chitters on to the end of a line, then there is the clash of the return, and the musical, or almost musical "cling" of the little bell. Tap tap tap tap tappety tappety tappety clash cling tappety tap tap. A silence. (Byatt 1994: 32-35)

An architectural trait that should also be considered is the structural division of the text which, in itself (so rhetoric has taught us)¹¹⁰, can be revealing. In this case we are faced with a tripartite division: the volume is split into three stories, and thus we may speak of a trilogy. The size of the stories in the sequence gives a certain symmetry to the whole – the centre piece being the longest and bounded by two shorter narratives – and reminds us of its pictorial equivalent: the triptych. Originally a three-panelled painting or carving devised for an altarpiece, the triptych was devoted to the celebration of some biblical episode

¹¹⁰ According to rhetorical precepts, a speech can either be divided into two or into three parts, depending on the intended nature of the argument. Whereas a division into two parts emphasises their tension, a division into three parts enhances the speech completeness without breaches (cf. Lausberg 1982: 97-98).

or religious figure for the benefit of the congregation assembled for mass (cf. Frazier 2000: 680), as is for instance the case with the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516) on the Temptations of Saint Anthony (16th century).¹¹¹ As time went by the triptych was adopted for profane subjects as in the case of a painting by Portuguese painter Constantino Fernandes (1878-1920) called *Marinheiros (Sailors)* (1913)¹¹² where he praises the life of anonymous seamen in its various aspects, alluding to their recurrent painful separations from their families in the central panel. Of more interest to our present purpose is Henri Fantin-Latour's (1836-1904) *Hommage à Delacroix (Homage to Delacroix)* (1864) (Fig. 2),¹¹³ which, without being a triptych *stricto sensu*, is spatially organised as a tripartite structure with the centre occupied by a Delacroix portrait with flowers underneath (the flowers are held by American painter James McNeill Whistler) – this detail (which likens the centre of the picture to an altar) further reinforces the suggestion of a tribute paid to a near predecessor – a situation apparently similar to the one we encounter in *The Matisse Stories* (Byatt 1994). In fact, the choice of a tripartite volume with a central story, longer and thematically more ambitious than the side stories, by indirectly evoking the triptych, inherently suggests the idea of homage; in this case homage is paid to Henri Matisse by A. S. Byatt.

Thus at the three levels we have so far considered (the graphic, the peritextual, and the structural) all semiotic elements tend to reinforce the idea that these stories are pieces written in honour of the painter. But what happens at the textual level? What do these narratives tell us? What are they about?

The “Subject”

Contrasting with Matisse's pervasive presence at all three levels referred to earlier on, it comes as a surprise that in the text of the three stories in this volume, the figure of the painter is almost entirely obliterated by the conspicuous presence of impressive women characters that dominate the

¹¹¹ The picture is reproduced for instance in Beaumont (1991: 30-31).

¹¹² For a reproduction of the painting see Serrano et al. (1925: plate XIX).

¹¹³ The picture is reproduced in Laclotte, Lacambre, and Frèches-Thory (2000: 54).



Fig. 2 – Henri Fantin-Latour, *Hommage à Delacroix*, (1864) (Musée d'Orsay, Paris)

action¹¹⁴ – portraits of women of different ages, at different stages in their professional and personal lives, in different fields of activity, of different classes and even races, but still portraits of women with their anxieties and fears, their unfulfilled dreams, their day-to-day courage and small victories, but also with their frustrations and defeats. Byatt is once more deliberately dealing with feminine issues in her work, but ironically (and this will be the first of a series of other ironies) she is doing so by conspicuously evoking a man who has been

¹¹⁴ Women dominate both technically, by being chosen as focalizers, and thematically. Susannah's story in "Medusa's Ankles" thematises women's anxieties with the process of growing old; in "Art Work", Debbie and Mrs. Brown enact the difficulties and constraints that make it especially hard for women to assert themselves as artists, but the story also optimistically points out new possibilities for them; Gerda Himmelblau and Peggi Nollett show how women's lives run the risk of being disastrously barren if they are unable to overcome their fears and to open up themselves to otherness.

attacked by feminists for his treatment of women in his paintings. Allegedly, these critics tell us, he has submitted them to the male gaze, a case nowhere more evident than in his “erotic or quasi-erotic”¹¹⁵ female nudes as well as in his stereotypical representations of odalisques¹¹⁶ (in what is known as the “Nice period” – roughly from 1919 to 1930, cf. Gowing 1979: 142).¹¹⁷

By doing so, Byatt is subjecting her less obvious intratextual object, Matisse, to a process of indirect scrutiny in that the scattered references to the painter’s works and life, which steadily grow in number, length and explicitness from the first to the third story, force the reader to re-evaluate Matisse from a radically new vantage point – the one that is being built by these successive fictions on women. But, at the same time, the reader is also asked to judge the women’s predicament in these stories from a perspective that takes into account Matisse’s achievement and the goal of his own art, namely, that “he looked to art for the undisturbed, ideal bliss of living.” (Gowing 1979: 56)

The result of this double act of reading is an increase in critical insight in both directions: by looking at Matisse from a feminine standpoint (which Byatt shares with her characters) we perceive the painter’s faults and shortcomings more forcefully (especially, but not exclusively, as a man); on the other hand, by bringing him in as a recurring reference and thus implicitly establishing him as a standard in the fictional universe of these stories, we become aware of his importance and how (in spite of his human limitations) he can still contribute to human lives (be we men or women, real people or fictional characters, laymen or artists) provided we are able to turn an unprejudiced look and grasp the full extent of his artistic achievement (an argument fully enacted in the final story, “The Chinese Lobster”).

By drawing her own fictional portraits of women (and here Byatt is creatively doubling Matisse’s own favourite subject – which happens to be also her own but for different reasons), she is at the same time indirectly and

¹¹⁵ I took these qualifiers from Elderfield (1995: 53, n. 7).

¹¹⁶ See, for instance, Duncan (1973).

¹¹⁷ Gowing (1979: 142) suggestively gives to the chapter devoted to this period the following title: “1919-1930 Wish Fulfilment”. See also Schneider’s chapter on the same period, “The Richness of Nothingness” (1984: 495 onwards).

interstitially sketching her own ambivalent portrait of Henri Matisse. Let us now see how this is done in the text(s).

I will pick up the central story since, as I have said, it is thematically more ambitious and structurally more complex than the other two. Its centrality can be attested by a curious feature that unequivocally and literally alludes to its nature as a replica of an altar piece. Inside “Art Work” we have indeed an altar, though of a special kind: the male painter Robin Dennison’s so-called “fetishes” (assorted objects, carefully collected, each of which is evocative of a pure colour) “have”, we are told, “a table of their own” and even though “once they were mantelpiece ‘things’ (...) as they took on their status of ‘fetishes’ they were given this solidly unassuming English *altar* (...) They were the small icons of a *cult of colour*” (Byatt 1994: 62, emphases added).

Anyone familiar with Matisse’s work and with his own ideas about his painting knows about the centrality of colour in his art and how important it became for him to discover new, more daring colour combinations and explore their effects (cf. Gowing 1979: 50-51).¹¹⁸ One might even say that he kept on experimenting with colour virtually to the end of his long life. The fact that Robin Dennison echoes in his devotion to colour, in a caricature-like way, the French painter’s own obsession, only underscores the differences between them. Robin’s immaturity as a man goes hand in hand with a certain hopelessness in his career in spite of a serious commitment to his art, and could not be further removed from Matisse’s own position as key figure in the field of 20th century art. Byatt is using an ironic strategy here which is after all in accordance with what we have seen to be her paradoxical use of “background” and “subject”. She is drawing a parallel or analogy, in this case between two figures, in order better to distinguish them.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ As Flam (1986: 111) notes, it is not only colour in itself that interests Matisse but its “structural use” and “the coordination of structural colour with structural brushstroke”.

¹¹⁹ Here I refer to a special kind of irony: immanent or presented irony (as distinct from verbal irony). This kind of irony is “defined in terms essentially akin to the characteristic mechanisms of irony both in its strategy and in its structure”, namely “to approach in order better to contrast”. For a full explanation of what is meant, see p. 47 of the present volume.

Let us look at other features of Robin as man and artist which obviously echo Matisse's own. Like the latter, he is selfishly obsessed with his work (to the point of ignoring everything else around him, entirely leaving the domestic burden and family duties to his wife, Debbie, "breadwinner and life-manager" – Byatt 1994: 58). This reminds us of Matisse's own self-absorption in his work and of his relinquishing of any domestic duty or worry to the women around him, his wife and his beloved daughter Marguerite, both of whom strove to protect him all the time from external trouble and any disturbance to his work.¹²⁰ Like Matisse, Robin awakened to painting in his late youth by being given "a set of gouache paints" (Byatt 1994: 55)¹²¹ "even though by upbringing and temperament he should have been a solicitor or an accountant" (Byatt 1994: 55)¹²² and (perhaps in an emulating gesture) he even goes to the South of France in search of light as the French painter did.¹²³ These factual coincidences, however, cannot hide the more glaring fact of the gulf that separates Byatt's fictional character from the Post-impressionist painter: Robin is inarticulate, immature and a bit of a failure as an artist (a fact obvious to anyone but his self-sacrificing wife); his theories of colour (on which he lectures Mrs. Brown, the cleaning lady) are a caricature of Matisse's self-reflexive thoughts collected in "Notes d'un peintre" ("Notes of a Painter")¹²⁴.

¹²⁰ However, unlike Debbie, only during a time of particularly serious financial troubles did Mme. Matisse contribute with her earnings as milliner to the family budget. At this time (1899) even Matisse had to look for a job and worked for a short period for a decorating workshop (cf. Flam 1986: 78). The protective attitude of Marguerite and Mme. Matisse, however, is amply alluded to by Matisse scholars who even refer to their utter discretion when imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1944, in order not to upset the painter (a fact that is ominously evoked in the last story of the volume "The Chinese Lobster") (Cf. Schneider 1984: 739).

¹²¹ For a similar episode in Henri Matisse's life see Gowing (1979: 9) and Frazier (2000: 430).

¹²² Matisse started life as a professional lawyer (according to his father's wish), but soon discovered his true vocation, cf. Gowing (1979: 9) and Flam (1986: 27).

¹²³ In 1898, Matisse decided to go south because of the light, cf. Gowing, (1979: 20) and Flam (1986: 51 onwards).

¹²⁴ "Notes d'un peintre" (1908) in Flam 1995. According to Schneider (1984: 732), Matisse, "in spite of his advice to painters to 'cut out their tongues', [...] enjoyed talking about

Thus, by drawing these ironic parallels between the two, the story makes us even more aware of their differences.

Robin Dennison masquerading as a Matisse surrogate is only one of the several characters in these stories that are ironically connected to the painter,¹²⁵ but maybe it is Mrs. Brown (the black charwoman who so enrages Robin whenever she comes to clean his studio) the most unexpected of Matisse's travestied representatives. Remarkable for her colourful and disconcerting attire, she has been working for this "artistic family" (Byatt 1994: 39) for the past ten years without raising the slightest suspicion as to her solitary, secretive artistic activity, which she carries on in her spare time with total devotion. Sheba Brown has in herself the will and determination of creating her art out of her own imaginative experience of her own life and outside the rules of any art school (which she perforce ignores and never attended). She resembles Matisse who, in spite of his academic training, worked most of the time according to his own intuitions and convictions and very often going against the grain of established rules and schools of painting.¹²⁶ Both are obsessed with colourful fabrics and with elaborate patterns that they use freely and unconventionally in their respective compositions.¹²⁷ Mrs. Brown's

painting". For the self-reflexive nature of Matisse's art (a feature he shares with Byatt), see also Schneider (1984: 131): "No painter has treated the theme of art more often and more constantly than Matisse. Internal references to his own work form an almost unbroken chain from the beginning to the end of his career".

¹²⁵ Others would include: Lucian (in "Medusa's Ankles"), Perry Diss and even Peggy Nollett (in "The Chinese Lobster").

¹²⁶ Gowing (1979: 22) says that: "Matisse, as he said later, did not paint by theory". For relevant passages on Matisse's artistic independence see also Gowing (1979: 59, 69, 108, 142, and 173).

¹²⁷ The love of costumes and fabrics (as seen in screens, hangings, tapestries, rugs, etc that form such an important part of his pictorial compositions) together with Matisse's preference for the private sphere and domestic interiors has led André Salmon (as cited by Elderfield 1995: 18 and 55 n. 32) to qualify him as a "painter of feminine gifts" which he also finds in his "modiste's taste whose love of colour equals the love of chiffon". For a justification of Matisse's "deeply engrained" love and knowledge of textiles, see Schneider (1984: 715).

compulsion always to be on the look-out for new materials (that she gets “from everywhere – skips, jumble sales, cast-offs, going through other people’s rubbish, clearing up after school fêtes” (Byatt 1994: 83-84) and her “urge to construct” (Byatt 1994: 84) are similar to Matisse’s compulsion to try his hand at new materials and media as a means to better understanding and composing his painting.¹²⁸ In both cases, this openness to experiment is the sign of the born artist. And yet again they could not be more different: she, a black working-class woman, abused by her man, obliged to go out to work in other people’s houses to support and educate two children and, in spite of it all, industriously knitting and sewing her own “soft sculpture” (Byatt 1994: 84) against all odds – silently pursuing a dream. Matisse, son of a middle-class family (dealing first in textiles and later in grain and seeds, cf. Schneider 1984: 715), only knew trouble in his late youth when he had to oppose his father’s wish for him to keep on being a lawyer (cf. Schneider 1984: 715-716), though for most of his life he had the financial means to devote himself solely to his art and the material conditions for that too.

But maybe the most striking difference between them is the image of the world reflected in/from their respective work. Though both of them share a healthy complaisance in life – manifest in Sheba Brown’s vibrant colours and in her good-humoured inventive wit with no trace of resentment, and in Matisse’s sensual delight in colour as source of light and in fanciful lines inspired by natural forms, she, however, comments critically “on the trivia of [women’s] daily life” (Byatt 1994: 83) and their troubles, whereas he devotes himself self-indulgently time and time again to the depiction of the beauty and charm of the female body – his most recurrent subject. We are thus made aware by Sheba Brown’s art of what was left out in Matisse’s work.

Once more, in this case, the analogies bring out the differences in a more emphatic way – this time differences based on gender, race, class and art. Mrs. Brown is a travestied version of Matisse¹²⁹ just as Robin is his caricature. The

¹²⁸ Matisse’s use of different media – sculpture, woodcuts, and prints and, later in life, paper cuts (“papier découpé”) illustrates his need for experiment till the very end.

¹²⁹ Note the self-reflexive (and self-conscious?) use of the word “travesty” at the end of this story (Byatt 1994: 90).

ironic parallels, however, do not stop here: Debbie, Mrs. Brown's employer, can herself be seen as somehow reflecting another of Matisse's facets as an artist; her wood-engravings echo his own woodcuts and prints of 1906 if not in subject matter at least in the chosen medium.¹³⁰ And yet again, what is a side experiment for him to indulge in in order to explore better what haunts him: the achievement of a female reclining figure suggestive of a tranquil, relaxed voluptuousness, is what is denied Debbie. She feels compelled to back up her husband's devotion to his own art by sacrificing her own career as an artist and this act of self-denial, though willingly undertaken is, nevertheless, resented by her (cf. Byatt 1994: 54).

Examples of this ironic strategy could be multiplied in an analysis of the other stories in the volume but what I would like to emphasise now is how this device works both ways: enabling the reader to critically apprehend now Matisse, now his fictional surrogates.

Conclusion

Just as the levelling and paradoxical relationship between "subject" and "background" was an indirect way of warning the reader as to an ambivalent response to Matisse: mixing open reverence with cautious reserve, so the drawing of ironical analogies forces the reader to engage in a critical, qualified appraisal of Matisse as man and artist.¹³¹ What we know of his life and art, here is implicitly brought into contact and subjected to comparison with Byatt's characters. But the writer uses these parallels not so much to diminish but rather to qualify the nature of her admiration for the painter.

Byatt salutes Matisse across decades, admitting her reverence for his work but also writing about him as she, a woman artist at the end of the 20th century,

¹³⁰ According to Gowing, Matisse was then characteristically trying to simplify and to refine the nude reclining figure from *Luxe, calme and volupté* (*Luxury, Calm, and Delight*) which for him epitomised "the ideal [he] envisaged for painting" (Gowing 1979: 67). On the other hand, Debbie's subject is fairies, a theme which self-reflexively evokes Byatt's own choices for much of her writing.

¹³¹ Note that Matisse himself was very much obsessed with analogies and duplication processes (Gowing 1979: 173).

sees him and reacts to his paintings and to his lifestyle: a complex of multiple responses fictionally enacted in her stories. Along with an enthusiastic endorsement of Matisse's sensual commitment to life (nowhere more evident than in "Art Work" and "The Chinese Lobster"), we sense her sympathy for Mme. Matisse and her resentment of Matisse's selfish self-engrossment in his work, only possible because he was a man (as I have tried to illustrate in my brief approach to "Art Work"). Again, her admiration for his serious commitment to his art and incessant thriving to make it respond to his engagement with life and the natural world is qualified by her critical insight into the self-indulgent nature of some of his representations of women (also suggested in the first and last pieces). Finally her decision (as manifest in these stories) to make her feminine art speak and (like Sheba Brown's) tell the stories about women that his paintings of them had left out, is a sign that she is creatively responding to him.

Like her characters as well as through her characters, Byatt is both identifying herself with Matisse in order better to make her own difference clear. Moreover, she is using some of the painter's methods and techniques and adapting them to her own art. I would describe her stance in these stories by applying to her what John Elderfield (1995: 51) has said about the French artist: she "struggles in various ways for identity in, and not in opposition to, difference". In other words, she identifies with the *other* artist – a male French painter of the first half of the 20th century – by means of various male and female characters in stories told from a woman's perspective at the end of the 20th century, in order better to enhance her own specific position.

Her "responsible reading"¹³² of Matisse invites her own reader to both "reread" Matisse and (in turn) read her *Matisse Stories* responsively and delight in them.

¹³² The expression "responsible reading" is used by Derek Attridge, in the sense of: "to read inventively, to respond to the inventiveness of the work in an inventive way, and thus affirm and prolong its inventiveness. [...] [A] reading that attempts to do justice to the alterity, singularity, and inventiveness of the literary work" (Attridge 2003: 33), and also: "a singular act, registering the here and now of the reader while it attempts to do justice to the otherness of the [work]" (Attridge 2003: 38).

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*Girl with a Pearl Earring: Narrating across Media*¹³³

¹³³ This paper was first delivered at *Narrative Matters Conference: Storying our World*, in Toronto, Canada, on 6-8 May 2008. It was based on research work done for my postdoctoral public examination (Agregação), held in June 2007, at the University of Lisbon, has been slightly adapted, and is printed for the first time here.



Fig. 3 – J. Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, (1665-1666) (The Mauritshuis, The Hague)

In her novel of 1999, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier explicitly takes as her starting point Johannes Vermeer's picture of the same title, painted around 1665-1666 (Fig. 3).¹³⁴ In his homonymous film of 2003 British director Peter Webber adapts Chevalier's novel to the cinema. These successive intersemiotic transpositions, from painting to novel and from novel to film, entail a series of hermeneutic and aesthetic procedures and decisions that are deeply dependent on the set of conventions and signs that govern each specific sign system, thus inevitably creating a gap that evades faithfulness and precludes total equivalence. Nevertheless, as I will try to show, each of them tries to recreate in the new medium some of the characteristics of the one(s) it takes as its source(s).¹³⁵ In my paper I propose to look into this precarious balance between respect for the original's features, on the one hand, and, on the other, the inevitable (very often, deliberate) difference from it, a balance of gains and losses.

¹³⁴ As only very few paintings were dated by Vermeer himself, there are doubts concerning the dating of many of his works by his leading specialists. In the case of this particular painting, Albert Blankert opts for 1665, while Walter Liedtke is in favour of 1665-1667. Arthur Wheelock excludes 1667 altogether and decides for 1665-1666. Chevalier's novel follows Wheelock's option.

¹³⁵ On this topic see Linda Hutcheon, especially her first chapter: "Beginning to theorize adaptation" (Hutcheon 2006: 1-32). See also, Roman Jakobson (1959).

As Chevalier herself admitted, she was first attracted to Vermeer's picture by the mystery and ambiguity inherent in it and the ensuing need of answering to its otherness:

I have had a copy of that painting for a long time. I love it, because it is beautiful and *mysterious*. The expression on the girl's face is *ambiguous* – sometimes she looks happy, sometimes sad, sometimes innocent, sometimes seductive. I was always curious about what she was thinking, and one day I wondered what Vermeer did to make her look like that. I began to understand that the painting is more than the picture of the girl, but also *a portrait of the relationship between the painter and the model*. I thought there must be a story behind her look, but when I found out that we don't know who the model for the painting was, I realized *I would have to make up the story myself*. (Chevalier n.d.: n.p., emphases added)

Therefore, the first thing she had to decide upon concerned the identity of the model. But again the signs found in the picture were elusive and contradictory:

In the painting the girl's clothes are very plain compared to other women Vermeer painted, and yet the pearl is clearly luxurious. I was fascinated by that contrast, and it seemed clear to me that the pearl was not hers. At the same time, I also felt she knew Vermeer well, as her gaze is very direct and knowing. (...) So, I thought, Who [*sic*] else would be close to him but not related? And I thought of a servant. (Chevalier n.d.: n.p.)

Seduced by the ambiguities and mystery inherent in the girl's face, Chevalier felt compelled to tell one of the many stories Vermeer's paintings suggest but do not tell,¹³⁶ and she opted for a first person narrative told by a maidservant in the Vermeer household whom she imagined as the model for the painting in question. What does this option entail? Instead of omniscience we have internal perspective or a personal point of view.¹³⁷ We, as readers, experience everything through the perspective and language of the protagonist, Griet,

¹³⁶ On this issue, Chevalier said: "There is so much mystery in each painting, in the women he depicts, so many stories suggested but not told. I wanted to tell one of them." Cf. <http://www.tchevalier.com/gwape/inspiration/index.html> (14-09-2005).

¹³⁷ Internal perspective, as defined by F. K. Stanzel, occurs "when the point of view from which the narrated world is perceived or represented is located in the main character or in the centre of events" (1984: 111).

who is at the same time the teller of her story. It is for her to describe the space and atmosphere around her together with the other characters. As in all first person reports, we tend to sympathise with her viewpoint and adopt it as our own.¹³⁸ We listen to her confessions, her innermost feelings, anxieties and desires and fully support and understand her actions and reactions. Moreover, by choosing a marginal dispossessed character, Chevalier will also be able to address issues of gender and class.¹³⁹ But this option leaves some areas of the story and of the characters in shadow, so to speak, the most important being the painter's thoughts, his personality and motivations. By opting for this narrative situation, Chevalier was creating in her novel an aura of mystery around the painter symmetrical to the one generated by Vermeer around the figure in the most famous of his paintings. As we will see, instead of a focalization exclusively centred on Griet, Peter Webber will opt for giving us, at significant moments, the painter's point of view, thus enabling the viewer to sympathise with this character's predicament.

Another important result of this narrative option is the scarce use of dialogue. Much of what is going on in terms of action, characters' behaviour, thoughts and motives is suggested by their looks and gestures (as described by the narrator) rather than by their words. This reinforces a sense of reticence and decorum which can be seen as an indirect reflection of Griet's own character but also as a result of the puritan environment of 17th century Holland. This reticence is also a feature both the book and the film share¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ As F. K. Stanzel has shown: “[p]resentation of consciousness and inside view are effective means of controlling the reader's sympathy, because they can influence the reader subliminally in favour of a character in a story” (1984: 127-128).

¹³⁹ Marion Lignana Rosenberg, in “‘Girl With a Pearl Earring’ by Tracy Chevalier, ‘The Music Lesson’ by Katharine Weber and ‘Girl in Hyacinth Blue’ by Susan Freeland”(2000: n.p.), notes that the type of narrative situation chosen in the novel: “enacts a *hoch* feminist maneuver [*sic*]: relating a monumental event (in this case, the genesis of one of Vermeer's most unsettling masterpieces) from the perspective of a ‘marginal’ participant (a woman, of course – here, Vermeer's poor, reluctant model), thereby rewriting history from the point of view of the voiceless and oppressed.”

¹⁴⁰ Chevalier's insistence on preserving this idea of reticence in the film adaptation of her novel is telling: “They [Andy Paterson and Anand Tucker] seemed to ‘get’ the novel,

with Vermeer's paintings, and which many of the painter's critics have noticed in his work as a whole.¹⁴¹ Besides, Griet's tendency to live within herself, in her inner world zealously guarded from others (even from her own family), ends up by conferring an introspective turn to the novel, very much in accord with the sense of introspection and detachment we perceive in many Vermeer's sitters absorbed in their own thoughts and actions.¹⁴²

We should now briefly allude to the more striking features of Vermeer's *oeuvre* as a whole in order to better understand the options made by Chevalier in her appropriation of his painting, as well as by Webber in his more recent adaptation of the novel.

In order better to achieve this let us now turn to another creative way of approaching and characterising Vermeer's art. I am thinking of American artist George Deem (b. 1932-), who, in 1999, created *Seven Vermeer's Corners*. (Fig. 4)¹⁴³ Deem has explored extensively the Dutch master's work, very often adding or subtracting elements from a recognisable Vermeer's picture, or else lifting a small detail to create his own painting (as in the case of *Two Vermeer Chairs*). Most often, as in *Seven Vermeer's Corners*, what we have is an invitation to the viewer to revisit a familiar Vermeer setting, where we can recognise the window(s) (characteristically on the left), the chairs, the curtains, the tiled floor, a cabinet, paintings and maps on the walls, but from which (as from a stage) Deem has removed Vermeer's actors, simply leaving the light projecting itself on and modelling these empty spaces. This post-modern strategy of appropriation calls attention, among other things, to the determining impor-

understanding that the key to the story was its restraint. One of the first things I said to them was that I did not want the main characters to sleep together" (Chevalier 2003b: n.p.).

¹⁴¹ Examples occur in the works of Edward Snow (1994), Lawrence Gowing (1997) and in Wayne Franits (2001: 8-26).

¹⁴² As examples, among many others, see, for instance, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* or *The Milkmaid*.

¹⁴³ I found references to George Deem's work in Hertel (2001). However, I make a totally different use of Deem's work in the present paper. See also the following site: <http://www.nancyhoffmangallery.com/artists/deem.html> (13-01-2006).



Fig. 4 – George Deem, *Seven Vermeer Corners*, (1999)

tance of the spatial dimension in Vermeer's work and of the way in which he uses light – light being in this case the true protagonist that comes to inhabit these confined spaces, thus calling attention to the eminent optical nature of Vermeer's work.¹⁴⁴ If we look at the seven corners Deem has chosen, we will notice that what they held in common is the obvious fact that they are confined spaces of domesticity (this domestic dimension being also hinted at by the doll's house appearance of Deem's painting), spaces to which the Dutch painter constantly reverted but which, at the same time, he also constantly transcended, as will be seen. As Tracy Chevalier herself perceived: "He paints a whole world

¹⁴⁴ See Gowing's reference to "Vermeer's optical impartiality" (1997: 22) or "the optical way" (1997: 24) which he relates to the possible use of the *camera obscura*. On the use of the latter by the Dutch master, see Steadmann (2001).

in a little corner of a room.” Thirty out of his thirty six paintings¹⁴⁵ are set in domestic interiors and twenty out of them are set in corners. But why this emphasis on a domestic interior space? Why this obsession with corners?

We had better look at the seven paintings alluded to in Deem’s picture. From left to right and top to bottom (clockwise), we have: *The Glass of Wine*, *The Geographer*, *A Lady Standing at a Virginal*, *Woman with a Lute*, *The Milkmaid*, *Woman Holding a Balance* and *Girl Interrupted at her Music*.

Of all the human figures in these paintings, nine in all, only two confront the viewer. All the others present themselves as being absorbed in their actions and thoughts. This circumstance contributes to create a distance between them and the viewer. They are, as it were, removed from him, into a sphere of their own that excludes him. Their positioning in corners further stresses their distance and inaccessibility. This denial of a direct connection between viewer and figures is also achieved by the positioning of several objects in the foreground, creating a sort of barrier. Even though the light and colour unequivocally guide our look to the central human protagonists on the canvas, access is at the same time denied us (by tables, chairs, curtains, etc.). Their inscrutable, averted faces and their cornered position suggest silence.¹⁴⁶ When referring to corners, Gaston Bachelard, in his work, *La poétique de l’espace*, admits: «[d]ans le coin, on ne parle pas à soi-même. Si l’on se souvient des heures du coin, on se souvient d’un silence, d’un silence des pensées» (Bachelard 1998: 130). Light effects also contribute to creating an atmosphere of quietness and reinforcing the mystery around these figures.¹⁴⁷

The inescapable sense of entrapment (even claustrophobia) generated by this sort of pictures which nevertheless exert a sort of magnetic attraction

¹⁴⁵ John Michael Montias (1989) reckons at about 50 the total number of pictures actually painted by Vermeer, of which several have disappeared. Even so, such a figure is very small when compared with the average production rate of Vermeer’s contemporaries.

¹⁴⁶ According to Montias: “a typical device Vermeer uses to suggest repose (...) is to conceal or shade over the eyes of his personages” (1989: 143-144).

¹⁴⁷ On the idea of silence and stillness as defining attributes of most of Vermeer’s pictures, one critic even suggested they should be viewed as “still lives” bearing in mind the literal sense of the expression in English. Cf. Tolnay (1953, as cited by Steadmann 2001: 164).

on the viewer (parallel to that exerted by their human figures upon the painter) is something to be found all along Vermeer's career. Confronted time and time again with these corners, we feel as if we have "the same corner of the same room – with the same window, the same little mirror, the same little drape" (Littlejohn 1996: 262), and experience a sense of both entrapment and familiarity, because in his paintings, as Lawrence Gowing (1997: 60) has recognised: "the space is revealed in its essence as a hollow cube," and in one of its corners the figures appear.¹⁴⁸ Their cornered position together with their self-absorbed look and the intervention of physical obstacles between them and the viewer, separate these human protagonists and their world irrevocably from our own. They are there, given to view, appealing to us, and yet for ever mysterious and inaccessible. This is one of the contradictions – maybe one of the founding contradictions – in Vermeer's work.

What kind of world is this that both fascinates and escapes us? What object of desire is revealed there – an object for ever present and elusive? Again the answer is given by statistics: twenty three out of the thirty six paintings by Vermeer feature young women and of these, nineteen are exclusively occupied by a single feminine figure. No wonder then that critics have been led to consider this artist's universe as an eminently feminine universe and its main subject as "women in the light of men's attention." (Snow 1994: 91)

No wonder then that Chevalier felt that her task was to recreate in her story a domestic environment, dominated by feminine characters, where the sense of imprisonment, claustrophobia and subordination should be somehow rendered in accordance with, in the novel's case, the main character's social and gender predicament. A story, moreover, focused on men's attention to

¹⁴⁸ The possibility that what we have represented in Vermeer's oeuvre is the same corner of the same room was explored by Philip Steadmann in his work of 2001 where he shows, in mathematically precise terms, by resorting to a geometrical reconstruction based on the analysis of perspective, that at least six of the painter's pictures undoubtedly represent the same room. This number may be increased since Steadmann could only use for his analysis those pictures which exhibit tiled floors; since the standard size of tiles at that time is known these were used as a stable parameter. Cf. Steadmann 2001: especially chapter 5, pp. 72-100). As Steadmann (2001:101) acknowledges, it is very likely that several other pictures where the floor is not visible represent the same space.

women, but this time seen through the lenses and concerns of a late twentieth century young novelist.¹⁴⁹ She therefore centres her story on young Griet and her experiences as maid, painter's assistant and muse in the Vermeer's household, and her entrapment in a tangled web of power relations, dependences, love, sex, jealousies and revenge that in the end determines her expulsion from the family home and almost leads to her downfall and loss. As she describes the girl's gradual literal ascension from cellar to attic, parallel to her growing ascendancy over the painter, she also artfully builds an intricate plot that makes Griet's life in the family household ever more difficult and her moves ever more constrained and dangerous.

Another consequence of dealing with a visual source text, determines an increased awareness of space in Chevalier's novel, one that leads her to conceive a feminine narrator-character with an acute aesthetic sensitivity which in turn impacts on the novel's descriptions and language. Her metaphors are carefully chosen so as to illustrate the protagonist's awareness of colours, forms and textures, a characteristic that becomes evident in the first chapter of the text by the way in which she describes the unexpected visitors (Vermeer and his wife, Catharina) and in the opening scene (which significantly coincides both in book and film) when Griet is presented in the act of chopping vegetables for the soup and disposing them in a circular arrangement, according to their colours, a detail that immediately attracts the painter's attention.

The girl's instinct for colours and space arrangements is recognised by him and determines her departure from her parents' house to Papists Corner, the starting point of the whole plot. Such a connection is made clear, both in novel and film, when, not long afterwards, the image of the "vegetable wheel" is echoed by another similar circular shape that will be a recurrent presence throughout the novel and which has a symbolic value:

¹⁴⁹ On being questioned about having a deliberate feminist agenda in her novel, Chevalier (n.d.: n.p.) answered: "I am not very fond of labels – 'feminist writer', 'historical novelist' etc. pigeonhole me and sound preachy, turning off readers. I called myself a feminist when I was 19, but I think the term is too exclusive to be meaningful. Certainly I tend to write about women – I am a woman too and it's easier. And because I write about the past, my women characters are usually struggling in circumstances that limit them – that's what life was like for most women until relatively recently. If that's considered feminist writing, so be it. I just say I am a woman who writes and leave it at that."

I walked to the centre of the square. There the stones had been laid to form an eight-pointed star set inside a circle. Each point aimed towards a different part of Delft. *I thought of it as the very centre of the town, and as the centre of my life.* (Chevalier 2003a: 14, emphasis added)

The eight-pointed star inside the circle appears as the visual equivalent of the wheel of vegetables and its meaning is reminiscent of the medieval wheel of fortune which allegedly determined everyman's destiny. This symbol recurs at decisive moments in Griet's story thus stressing its symbolic import in both novel and film.

The symbolic use of space is also apparent in the way it is structured throughout the novel. The space of the town as well as the space of the family house obey to significant divisions and are saturated with meaning, making apparent power relations (in terms of gender, class, and religion) operating in society at large and also at family level.¹⁵⁰ Because of time limits I will concentrate solely on the latter. The space of the Vermeers' house (significantly positioned in the peripheral Papists Corner, as pertained to a family belonging to the catholic minority) is structured along a vertical axis where the top rooms in the house – the studio and the attic are the exclusive realm of the painter – the patriarch – whereas the social and private rooms of the ground floor are dominated by the women, Maria Thins (the painter's mother-in-law) and her daughter Catharina, attended by Tanneke, the senior maid. Griet, the newly arrived servant and therefore the least important person in the household, has no space left but: “a hole in the floor of one of the storage rooms” – the lowest location in the building's vertical structure, a dark, damp and narrow space corresponding to her powerless, destitute position.

Vermeer and Maria Thins are clearly the most powerful with rooms where only they themselves or people they trust can enter. It is interesting to notice that, even though Catharina, as putative mistress of the house, ostentatiously wears the keys to all the rooms dangling from her waist, she is not

¹⁵⁰ On the importance of the use of domestic space in Dutch painting of the 17th century, see: “The Divided Household of Nicolaes Maes” by Martha Hollander (1994), where she argues, for instance: “the interplay of spaces, particularly as a vehicle for commentary on social life, became a stock in trade for painters in the second half of the 17th century” (Hollander 1994: 151).

allowed to enter her husband's studio. Her cunning mother relinquishes this outward symbol of power and authority to her daughter, but effectively she is the one who is in charge and responsible for the household management. And even though she has to comply with her son-in-law, the nominal patriarch, it is Maria Thins who manages the family business. Moreover, it is her money that makes up for their financial difficulties, thus enforcing her position though in a subtle, inconspicuous way – appropriately her private rooms are “at the back of the house” (Chevalier 2003a: 22).¹⁵¹

But power relations inside the domestic space will vary along the story and are subject to constant negotiations. The most dramatic change occurs after Tanneke complains for sleeping in the same room with the baby's nurse and not getting enough sleep. The painter, “who rarely showed interest in domestic affairs,” (Chevalier 2003a: 122) unexpectedly suggests that Griet should sleep in the attic and Tanneke take up Griet's position in the cellar. This, of course, would enable Griet to comply more easily with her new secret task of helping him with the paints. This upward move to the attic, in strong contrast to her initial descent into the cellar, coincides with Griet's new functions as Vermeer's assistant, but is ambiguously presented: apparently it can be seen as a promotion, a rise – she now has a room of her own in the up most part of the building, thus signalling her newly gained status as the artist's help, model and muse, but, ironically, the truth is she is totally dependent on others for moving around. Catharina holds the keys to the attic rooms and acts now as a sort of gaoler to the girl, thus mitigating her own unease in relation to Griet's physical nearness to her husband.

Besides, the girl's new status, which gives her a certain power over the painter, is won at a high price, since once it is discovered it may seriously endanger her position in the household and even in the local community. So that her apparent rise paradoxically masks her utter vulnerability – something which has to do with her condition as a working-class woman, not only dependent on masters, but also on parents, first, and husbands, later.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ This domestic arrangements as well as the division of space among the family members follow biographical and historical sources, as noted by Montias (1989: 154-155).

¹⁵² For more on this utter vulnerability and dependence of maidservants on masters, see Schama (2004: 459).

This utter feminine subordination also becomes apparent in sexual terms, since she becomes the object of desire of three men: of Van Ruijven, Vermeer's patron and best customer, of the painter himself, and of Pieter, the son of a meat-stall owner in the local market. Their interest in her, however, is different in nature. Van Ruijven is a womaniser who loses no opportunity of harassing her, thus trying to appease his sexual appetite, as he did in the past with others. (Chevalier uses ekphrastic references to one of Vermeer's paintings, *The Girl with a Wine Glass*, making it instrumental as a warning to young, inexperienced Griet to beware of Van Ruijven).¹⁵³ Vermeer, on the other hand, is attracted by her aesthetic sensitivity perceiving in her a soul mate, though he is not insensitive to her physical charms either. Even though he does not mean any harm, his painter's interest in her makes him blind to the possible dangers their growing intimacy might entail for the girl. In order to escape Van Ruijven's assaults Griet resorts to her master's protection, a risky path since it may jeopardize her post and ruin her reputation, a situation from which she will only be saved by marrying Pieter, another sort of dependence.¹⁵⁴

This intricate network of relations, dependences, and ties leads her into a *cornered* position, one that is literally rendered in spatial terms: the sense of confinement and restrained movement emphasised all along the novel is also

¹⁵³ The productive use of *ekphrasis* in the novel, with many descriptions of Vermeer's paintings, is echoed by the use of a similar device in the film: reproductions of several of the painter's works can be viewed in several sequences.

¹⁵⁴ That her engagement and marriage to Pieter is seen as another sort of dependence becomes evident on page 202 of the novel: "Peter smiled at me, his eyes glazed as if he had looked too long at the sun. He had managed to pull loose a strand of my hair, and tugged it now with his fingers. 'Some day soon, Griet, I will see all of this. You will not always be a secret to me.' He let a hand drop to the lower curve of my belly and pushed against me. 'You will be eighteen next month. I'll speak to your father then.'

I stepped back from him – I felt as if I were in a hot, dark room and could not breathe. 'I am still so young. Too young for that.'

Pieter shrugged. 'Not everyone waits until they're older. And your family needs me.' It was the first time he had referred to my parents' poverty, and their dependence which became my dependence as well. Because of it they were content to take his gifts of meat and have me stand in an alley with him on a Sunday.

I frowned. I did not like being reminded of his power over us.'

replicated in the film and can be seen as a significant sign at two levels, at least: as a means of creating a narrative equivalent for the atmosphere pervading most of Vermeer's paintings (where, as we have seen, corners are in conspicuous evidence), and as a way of calling attention to working-class women's predicament in 17th century Holland.¹⁵⁵

Peter Webber's film, however, is not only content in giving us the girl's difficult situation and her final inability to fully understand the artist's attitude towards her, as happens in Chevalier's text. Instead of a point of view exclusively centred in Griet, the viewer is given the opportunity of witnessing, at significant moments, the painter's vision and his position inside the family household.¹⁵⁶ The sense of being constrained and at the mercy of his family needs, of his wife unreasonableness, of his mother-in-law's bossiness, and his main client's uncongenial demands, all this allied with the anxiety generated by the slow pace at which he conceives and paints his pictures¹⁵⁷ give Vermeer a feeling of entrapment which is made manifest in several of the film sequences. The painter's emotional explosion upon the theft of a tortoise comb by his

¹⁵⁵ It can also be read as a means of alluding to the essential problem at the heart of Vermeer's work and, after all, at the heart of all figurative painting, as I argue in an extended version of this paper. Enclosing his figures in a corner may be seen as the symbolic equivalent of all figurative painting's need to possess or contain reality within the limited space of the canvas. On this, see Gowing (1997: 43) or Lévy-Strauss (as cited in Berger n.d.: 84).

¹⁵⁶ Sometimes what happens is the use of "subjective camera" or internal viewpoint, by means of which we see what the painter see. At other moments and more often what we have is a procedure that takes the painter as the object of the camera showing his expressions and gestures as the eloquent filter of the surrounding reality. Though this point of view is technically called neuter, it is not, by any means, arbitrary. On this see Marie-Thérèse Journot (2005), especially her entries for: "point of view", "focalization" and subjective camera." See also the following note.

¹⁵⁷ Irene Netta (2001) argues that both the slowness in the production of his paintings and the fact that he did not like to accept commissions, are very unusual attitudes among painters in the period. Montias, however, is not so definite, referring to the possibility of several commissions (cf. Montias 1989: 202, for instance). For the more mercantile side of Vermeer's art, see, for instance, Montias (1989: 142, 180-81 and 246). Some critics attribute Vermeer's precocious death to stress and anxiety due in part to the situation described above. See, for instance, Montias (1989: 212).

daughter Cornelia (with a view to incriminating Griet), an episode significantly reported at second hand in the text, is given in the film an unprecedented dramatic force, thus calling attention to his own predicament at having to comply with so many demands both inside his growing family and in the art market around him.

Besides the maidservant's predicament, in the film, more so than in the novel, where his position is ambiguously rendered, we witness the painter's own strained position with whom we tend to sympathise.

Thus the circle comes to a close: from the enigmatic smile of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* we plunge imaginatively into Chevalier's novelistic world of a maidservant's story of hard apprenticeship and love in the Dutch Golden Age, to revisit it by the hand of film director Peter Webber, this time supported by a multiple perspective¹⁵⁸ which allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the male protagonist's situation as *pater familias* and bread winner as well as artist in "the first mass consumers' art market in European history" (Schama 2004: 318).

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¹⁵⁸ Following Robert Stam, Linda Hutcheon (2006: 54), argues that: "[m]ost films use the camera as a kind of moving third-person narrator to represent the point of view of a variety of characters at different moments." This is precisely the case in many of this film sequences.

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