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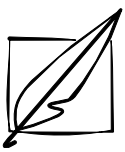

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ARTICLES

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Spillikins in the Parlor: Raymond Chandler, Realism and the Golden Age of Detective Fiction

Abstract

This paper reexamines Raymond Chandler's influential critique of British Golden Age detective fiction, which promoted hard-boiled realism against the perceived artifice of Golden Age stories. While acknowledging the impact of Chandler's essay "The Simple Art of Murder", I submit that his critique oversimplifies the complexity and enduring appeal of works by authors such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. Contemporary scholarship reveals that Golden Age detective fiction engaged deeply with social, psychological, and gender issues through sophisticated narratives. By reassessing these works and challenging Chandler's reductive categorization, this paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the literary value and cultural significance of Golden Age detective fiction.

Keywords: Raymond Chandler, Golden Age, detective fiction, realism, literary criticism, British novels, hard-boiled fiction

1. A Brittle Dichotomy

As early as 1944, in his scathing critique of British novels of detection entitled *The Simple Art of Murder*,[1] novelist and screenwriter Raymond Thornton Chandler (1888-1959) challenged what had come to be known as the Golden Age of detective fiction, framed in an idealized British setting between 1920 and 1939. Chandler was far from the only critic of the fashionable genre: multiple voices –

[1] Chandler essay first came out in the December 1944 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. It later appeared in revised and expanded form in Howard Haycraft's 1946 anthology *The Art of the Mystery Story,* and was reissued in the eponymous 1950 collection of essays *The Simple Art of Murder*. The essay has been widely circulated ever since, as now attested by the multiple copies freely posted online.

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both within and without academia – had been raised to question or openly attack the legitimacy and the status of detective story writing as a serious form of literature. Objections to its popularity varied in range and reach.[2] But Chandler's views were to have a more enduring effect over later-views on the genre. In the decades following its publication, his essay continued to shape critical perceptions of Golden Age detective fiction and his influence can be traced in the work of several scholars and writers who grappled with the legacy of the Golden Age. Even though critical appreciations for the genre did sporadically appear in the 1950s and, to a broader extent, in the 60s, as scholars began to explore the genre's societal implications, misgivings persisted. In 1972, Julian Symons still echoed Chandler in his complaint that Golden Age tended to be "wholly artificial" and its characters "de-gutted", emotionally insulated from serious engagement with the complexities of human nature and society (Symons 1972: 119). Symons argued that the social and political context was often ignored in these stories, which were disconnected from real life and excessively focused on plot at the expense of characterization.

By the 1990s, some critics and scholars began to push back against Chandler's dichotomy between hard-boiled realism and Golden Age artifice. Discussing Sayers, Carolyn Heilbrun argued that, far from being a mark of escapism or conservatism, the cozy world of Golden Age fiction could be seen as a radical space of female autonomy and agency (Heilbrun 1990). Heilbrun's essay on detective fiction as "novels of manners" opened up new ways of thinking about the gender politics of Golden Age detective fiction and challenged Chandler's masculinist assumptions.[3] More recently, scholars like Susan Rowland and Gill

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2 W.H. Auden denigrated the genre's formulaic nature, arguing that detective fiction lacks the depth and seriousness of high literature (https://harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/). Similar remarks were made by Edmund Wilson in his notorious essay "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" (1948), and debate was further fuelled by the rise of literary criticism in the mid-20th century, which championed modernist and realist literature over genre fiction. Detective fiction, in particular, was chastised for his shallowness, against the psychological depth and artistic innovation of the modernist canon. This is the perspective echoed in academic circles, most notably by F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis. Q.D. Leavis lambasted Dorothy Sayers' fiction as "stale, second hand, hollow" and attacked the genre for lacking the "breath of life" and for its idealised view of old-style academia (Leavis, Q.D. 1937: 336-337). Stephen Brauer provides an insightful assessment of the critical reception of Golden Age fiction (https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ wpw/thirties/thirties%20brauer.html).

3 (Heilbrun 1990: 231-243). The essay is part of whole chapter dedicated to detective fiction which also addresses the issue of gender, in Heilbrun's monograph *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*.

Plain have built on Heilbrun's insights, looking at the ways in which Golden Age writers negotiated and subverted the genre's gendered conventions (Rowland 2001 – Plain 2001). And Stephen Knight has added much-needed cultural and historical insight as he noted that "in spite of its general acceptance, Chandler's critique of the English clue-puzzle as mechanistic and trivial overlooks the actual tensions and complexities of the sub-genre and is clearly for him – as for many later American commentators – a way of positioning the American model as being more truth-telling and indeed more masculine" (Knight 2007: 111).

Things are said to have changed more markedly in the current critical landscape: under the liberalizing agenda of cultural studies, the merits of this much maligned popular genre seem, at last, to have been acknowledged widely. Detective fiction is presumably no longer marginalized in the humanities. No justifications need apply when setting up or teaching a course on novels of detection.[4] Insightful research has been published on their ramifications into highly contentious societal or individual issues to do with race, gender, class, religion, science (to name just the most recognizable few).[5]

Despite such welcome readjustments in perspective, I would argue that a measure of bias persists in studies on detection, all the more subtle perhaps because it rehashes in politically correct terms Chandler's damning – and yet brittle – dichotomy between realism and idealism, between cozy and hard-boiled, between writing that conveys "the authentic flavor of life as it is lived" (Chandler 231) and novels that are instead blithely unaware of "what reality was" (Chandler 232).[6]

The purpose of this paper is to re-read Chandler and to sample British Golden Age stories and novels, to establish whether Chandler's censure still holds, and whether Golden Age fiction deserves more, and more articulate, recognition than

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[4] Oxford and Cambridge offer a range of Detective and Crime Fiction courses. So do Harvard, Yale and Princeton. See for instance: https://www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/news/2023/march/discovery-programme-year-10-students-begins; https://humanities.yale.edu/special-courses/hums-340-detective-story;https://english.fas.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/english/files/liu.pdf?m=1689600504. Last access July 2024

[5] By way of example see Martin Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story* (London: HarperCollins, 2015); Heather Duerre Humann, ed., *Gender Bending Detective Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017); David Lehman, *The Mysterious Romance of Murder* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Andrew Pepper, *Crime Fiction* (in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Novel* and Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023, 127-141).

[6] Henceforth, all parenthetical citations from Chandler's essay will be given as simple page numbers, which refer to the anthology of detective fiction essays edited by Haycraft (1946).

it already has. More specifically, my working hypothesis is that the long-standing "cozy/hardboiled" binary, and its underlying "superstition/reason" philosophical counterpart, have at the very least served their purpose, and are in fact ill-equipped to tackle what has been long seen as the multifaceted writing of many Golden Age authors. Via a hazardous detour that sets Chandler and Eco side by side in their treacherous quest for realism, I will untangle a few thematic threads which map out the very rough contours of a broader, more nuanced assessment of Golden Age fiction. What I am pursuing here is less a systematic reading of Golden Age texts against Chandler's pronouncements, than a provisional reappraisal of their relevance and lasting appeal above and beyond such pronouncements.

2. A Hero in Search of Hidden Truth

Chandler's essay on murder fiction starts with a forceful, multi-pronged attack on the alleged failures of traditional detective stories, which are English rather than American, and somewhat reductively bundled under the category of "the traditional or classic or straight-deductive or logic-and-deduction novel of detection" (225). The best – or possibly most notorious – examples of these are said to belong to the heyday of the British Golden Age (1920s-1930s), which Chandler detests openly as exemplifying the wider "social and emotional hypocrisy" of the contemporary publishing world, built on "indirect snob appeal" and "intellectual pretentiousness" (222-223). In Chandler's mordant verdict: "It is the ladies and gentlemen of what Mr. Howard Haycraft […] calls the Golden Age of detective fiction that really get me down" (226). Faults are to be found at all levels, signally in terms of form, content and style. In terms of form, Golden-Age novels are neither new nor old: they inhabit a sort of limbo whose formulaic haziness is nonetheless well suited to a gullible readership or to the ruthless taste of powerful booksellers. For Chandler, the sort of realism most of these novels peddle (if at all) is mere pretense. Their themes and motifs are hackneyed, and their puzzles are both predictable and patently implausible. Even when polished, their style is paradoxically "dull" and their characterisation lacklustre.

Chandler is final in his sweeping indictment: the five British detective fiction writers he mentions in his essay (A.A.Milne, E.C.Bentley, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Freeman Wills Crofts) are rather curtly dismissed[7] against the

[7] Of the four internationally renowned Queens of Crime from the Golden Age, Chandler only mentions Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) and Agatha Christie (1890-1976). No

superior realist strain embodied in the works of Dashiell Hammett, the paragon of American hard-boiled fiction. Hammett's *Maltese Falcon* (1930) is to Chandler the quintessential model of a detective story done right, formally, thematically and stylistically. And Sam Spade is the redemptive hero all "realistic mystery fiction" (233) ought to have. Classics of the British Golden Age will come across as stilted and banal against the punchy realism of Hammett's narratives.

Chandler first appears to tread lightly when dealing with individual Golden Age writers. So, for instance, he mentions Dorothy Sayer's talent for characterization, acknowledges Freeman Wills Crofts as "the soundest builder of them all when he doesn't get too fancy" (229) and adds that "the best of them" were well aware of the glaring compromise underlying their stories: unable to convey the authentic flavour of life, such authors knowingly "pretend that what they do is what should be done" (231). Despite such concessions, the final verdict is stark:

> There is a very simple statement to be made about all these stories: they do not really come off intellectually as problems, and they do not come off artistically as fiction (231)

For Chandler, the intellectual and artistic failures of Golden Age fiction ultimately derive from their systemic lack of realism, or in other words, from their writers' ignorance as to "what reality was" (232). Chandler's use of the words "cosy" and "cute" in his critique of detective fiction is particularly revealing of his realist agenda and his disdain for what he perceives as the artificiality of the genre. The word "cosy" (or "cozy" in American English) carries connotations of comfort, warmth, and a sense of sheltered intimacy.[8] In the context of detective fiction, Chandler employs "cosy" to suggest a world that is insulated from the harsh realities of life, a fictional realm where violence and crime are merely puzzles to be solved within the confines of a carefully constructed and ultimately reassuring narrative. This use of "cosy" aligns with Chandler's critique of the genre as a form of escapism, one that fails to engage with the true nature of crime and

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mention is made of Margery Louise Allingham (1904-1966) or Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982). A.A. Milne (1882-1956) is taken apart with relish, and E.C. Bentley (1875-1956) is evoked only indirectly via his *Trent's Last Case* (1913). Among the other many unsung heroes of the Golden Age we could mention: C.E. Vulliamy (aka Anthony Rolls 1866-1971), Christopher St John Sprigg (aka Christopher Caudwell 1907-1937), Anthony Berkeley Cox (1893-1971), Ellen Wilkinson (1891-1947). See a comprehensive list of Golden Age writers on this Golden Age of Detection wiki: http://gadetection.pbworks.com/w/page/7930628/FrontPage. Last access July 2024.

8 The OED traces it back to the Scots Gaelic *còsag* meaning a small hole or cave used for shelter.

its consequences in the real world. However, Chandler's use of "cosy" may also carry a more pointed accusation of political connivance with the *status quo*. The OED lists an additional meaning of "cosy" as "of a transaction or arrangement: beneficial to all those involved and possibly somewhat corrupt." This connotation suggests a certain level of complicity or collusion, a sense that the parties involved are working together to maintain a comfortable and mutually advantageous situation, even if it means turning a blind eye to unethical or illegal practices. By describing detective fiction as "cosy", Chandler may be implying that the genre not only fails to challenge the social and political order but actively collaborates in maintaining it by presenting a sanitized and ultimately reassuring view of crime and its consequences. In this sense, the "cosiness" of detective fiction becomes not just a matter of escapism but a form of ideological complacency, a refusal to engage with the deeper structural problems that give rise to crime and injustice.

Similarly, Chandler's use of the term "cute" suggests a certain triviality and superficiality in the construction of detective stories. The OED indicates that "cute" originated as a shortening of "acute" in the 18th century, initially meaning clever or sharp-witted. However, by the early 20th century, the word had acquired a more negative connotation, suggesting a kind of self-conscious cleverness or affectation. Chandler uses "cute" in his essay to describe the overly contrived and artificial nature of many detective plots, which rely on improbable coincidences and convoluted schemes to create a sense of mystery and suspense. As he puts it, "The boys with their feet on the desks know that the easiest murder case in the world to break is the one somebody tried to get very cute with" (231). For Chandler, this "cuteness" is a mark of the genre's lack of authenticity and its failure to engage with the real world of crime and detection. By using this term, Chandler emphasizes his view that the detective story, as it was commonly practiced in his time, was a form of intellectual game-playing ("spillikins in the parlor" 236) rather than a serious exploration of human nature and the complexities of crime.[9] It is at that point, however, that Chandler's line of argument begins to waver, suggesting ambivalence and a degree of inconsistency. For one, he must admit at the start

[9] See OED, entries *cosy*, *cute*. The senses of cosy (or cozy) listed in the OED chart the main points of Chandler's indictment: Golden Age novels are cosy because they eschew graphic violence or brute force, thus "giving a feeling of comfort and warmth" (sense 1). However, their fuzzy attitude is ultimately condescending, complacent (sense 2: "Not seeking or offering challenge or difficulty; complacent:") if not altogether conniving with the status quo, as in (sense 3: "of a transaction or arrangement beneficial to all those involved and possibly somewhat corrupt:a cosy deal"); OED 3rd edition v., *cosy*.

of his essay that notions of realism change in time: what was once realistic may come across as outlandish fancy or parody to us in the present. Yet, he largely neglects his initial proviso once he moves on to critique Golden Age novels. The kind of realism these lack is the realism exemplified instead in Hammett, who, we are told, "wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life" (234):

> They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street, Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; (234)

Unlike English stories of detection, whose "only reality […] was the conversational accent of Surbiton and Bognor Regis", Hammett "had a basis in fact". Like all writers, he did invent some details, but his narrative "was made up out of real things" (234). Chandler's praise of "real things" is obviously problematic, unless its broad sense is seen within the restricted scope of this essay. And Chandler is straightforward in this respect. We are soon told that the "real things" belong to the rough world of American life in the first half of the 20th century, of which we are given extended examples and into which the wider global world is telescoped:

> The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge. (236)

American *realia* are, then, the foundation and sole ingredient of good mystery fiction. Or are they? Qualifications were in order, apparently, because Chandler had earlier claimed that realism also entails "movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual elucidation of character, which is all the detective story has any right to be about anyway." (236) Therefore, realism must also be a writing and

narrative style, essential to the very claims of detective fiction *qua* fiction. It is a set of stylistic skills one may learn and apply effectively or poorly abuse for a variety of reasons, which Chandler keenly identifies and dutifully sets out:

> The realistic style is easy to abuse: from haste, from lack of awareness, from inability to bridge the chasm that lies between what a writer would like to be able to say and what he actually knows how to say. It is easy to fake; brutality is not strength, flipness is not wit, edge-of-the-chair writing can be as boring as flat writing; dalliance with promiscuous blondes can be very dull stuff when described by goaty young men with no other purpose in mind than to describe dalliance with promiscuous blondes. There has been so much of this sort of thing that if a character in a detective story says "Yeah," the author is automatically a Hammett imitator. (235)

Nor is this the whole story. Chandler concludes his essay with an urgent appeal: an appeal for redemption. Against the bleak scenario of extortion and violence outlined above, the writer of detective fiction is morally bound to provide a redeeming figure in the form of a – presumably male – detective/hero, who must be "a relatively poor man", "a common man". Someone who "belongs to the world he lives in", and is endowed with "rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque" (237):

> The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. […] He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. (237)

That Chandler's trenchant reading of murder fiction under the banner of realism should end with idealistic statements of this kind is intriguing. Honor, honesty, pride, and common sense will be the attributes of a male/detective/hero who acts, moves, and talks in the thick of history, in accordance with his own times. But such attributes become virtues because, at least to some extent, they will transcend the contingencies and the compromises of history: universally

recognizable qualities which entitle the detective to become "the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world". Chandler's ideal detective will possess an instinctive "sense of character", a strong, presumably historical, identity which strengthens his mettle against the hurdles of society; but he will also show an unexpected, presumably trans-historical "range of awareness", which in the equivocal terms of his conclusion Chandler praises as the sole product of "the world [the detective] lives in". If my reading holds, Chandler's call for unvarnished realism thus morphs into a fervent plead for the time-honoured pattern of the hero's quest, a search phrased in the "weathered" romanticized vocabulary of "adventures" and "hidden truths". Once again before concluding, Chandler will insist that "the story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure" (237). If these are the guiding assumptions and final conclusions of Chandler's essay on the Art of Murder, we need to go back and test them against his specific objections to Golden Age fiction. Chandler's reading of A.A. Milne is a good starting point.

3. A Rum Business

Chandler's critique of Milne's *The Red House Mystery* begins by juxtaposing the "deceptive smoothness" of its *Punch* style against its tenuous plot, which is said be "light in texture" (227). This 1922 bestseller from the Golden Age is said to offer a flawed puzzle, a spurious "problem of logic and deduction" which upon careful analysis presents a false situation and bears no "elements of truth and plausibility" (227), at least according to the criteria for truth and plausibility implied by Chandler. Chandler duly lists implausibilities about the case that Milne supposedly ignored or turned a blind eye to: the dubious legality of an inquest held by the coroner on a body yet to be legally identified; the uncorroborated evidence of a witness who, being very close to the murder, would be automatically suspect; the gross absence of a thorough investigation by the police on the victim's former status in the village or his current status in Australia, whence he's said to have only just arrived; the unbelievable incompetence of the police surgeon in examining the body; the improbable neglect of clues (the victims' clothes) and of factual knowledge tied to the victim's community (228). Antony Gillingham, the genial sleuth of Milne's novel is made to pale against the street-smart tactics of Sam Spade (or indeed Philip Marlowe) : Chandler dismisses him as "an insouciant amateur", "a nice lad with a cheery eye, a nice little flat in town, and

that airy manner", whom the "English police endure […] with their customary stoicism", "I shudder to think," Chandler adds with a strident touch of homoerotic machismo, "what the boys down at the Homicide Bureau in my city would do to him" (229). Antony's characterization as "insouciant", "airy", "nice", "cheery" serve to stigmatize him as an effete male, who, we are expected to deduce, would have no counterpart in real-life sleuthing. Chandler's implied criterion of gendered realism in the depiction of male detectives is at the very least debatable.[10] It certainly makes us reflect on the scope and the quality of those "facts of life" Chandler laid out as the foundation of proper detective writing. Undoubtedly, Chandler's critique of Milne is piercing and his objections to plot inconsistencies judicious, that is provided we accept the assumptions that 1) the sole, or primary aim of detective fiction must be to set up a true-to-life, factual situation of mystery for a reader to unveil progressively via clues, logic and deduction; and 2) Golden Age detective stories such as Milne's are knowingly offered to readers as instances of this underlying investigative model, the rules of which their plots actually fail to abide. The first assumption champions realism – itself, we have seen, an ambivalent, and heavily gendered notion in Chandler – and equates the search for truth with factual verification. Anything short of verifiable facts, we are warned, would be a fraud,[11] even though in that case the detective story writer would be "fooling the reader without cheating him" (226). This interpretive yardstick is obviously helpful on occasion, and in a sense works well to bring out the artistic licenses and the factual faults of Milne's story, which Chandler is eager to expose. However, we know from Chandler's final remarks that far more than "simple" realism is required of his realist detective. Chandler's "common man", animated not solely by the powers of logic, but by a "lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness" (237) is also charged with the burden of providing a moral response to simple facts; a response rooted in his own instinctive sense of honour and honesty. These idealistic virtues he is continually asked to exercise in his search for truth, against and beyond the mere ground of

[10] The troubled conflation of masculinity and homoeroticism in Chandler and, more amply, in hardboiled fiction *vis à vis* traditional detective fiction has been amply discussed. An interesting exchange on this subject may be found at https://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2012/07/the-detective-and-the-closet/. See also: Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Raymond Chandler's Private Dick," *The Atlantic* (blog), November 26, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/ entertainment/ archive/2012/11/raymond-chandlers-private-dick/265589/. Last access July 2024.

[11] "If the impersonation is impossible once the reader is told the conditions it must fulfill, then the whole thing is a fraud." (227)

procedural consistency or factual evidence. But if this mélange of realism and idealism is admissible, there may be more to the *Red House Mystery* than the procedural flaws pointedly itemised by Chandler. For, as Chandler grudgingly admits, Milne's story does work, notwithstanding the flaws, given the sales record and the many editions over sixteen years.

In *The Red House Mystery*, Milne employs a range of narrative strategies that contribute to the novel's undercurrent of rumness and unease. One such strategy is the anthropomorphizing of the house itself, titular protagonist and the very first character introduced in the novel as "taking a siesta" in the "drowsy heat of the summer" (Milne 1922: 1). This sort of dormant state, combined with the charged symbolic characterization of the house as "Red", foreshadows bloody awakenings to come, with the red of the house turning into the site of a killing "much more horrible" than just "hot blooded killing" and "too horrible to be true" (121). The unconvincing idyll of restful peace evoked here at the beginning is redeployed to great effect at the end of chapter II, when Antony approaches the "old red brick house". The impression of calm the house and its surroundings exude are made to "hang on" artificially in the air (as cleverly underlined by suspenseful trailing dots) only to be immediately denied by the unsettling turn of events, the gist of which has to do with claustrophobic scene of a "closed door":

> As he came down the drive and approached the old red-brick front of the house, there was a lazy murmur of bees in the flower-borders, a gentle cooing of pigeons in the tops of the elms, and from distant lawns the whir of a mowing-machine, that most restful of all country sounds. … And in the hall a man was banging at a locked door, and shouting, "'Open the *door*, I say; open the *door* !"' "Hallo!"' said Antony in amazement. (Milne 1922: 19)

To be sure, in its "delightfully inviting" layout and genteel features, The Red House comes to us first as the embodiment of cosiness itself, its "cream-washed walls and diamond-paned windows, blue-curtained" beckoning guests in to "stay the night" (Milne 1922: 4). It is a cosiness, however, that very quickly turns into a nightmare of confinement, as the rooms, walls, and eventually even the "thick belt of trees" (57) that delimit the house and its park "shutting out the rest of the world" (57) become too close for comfort. The house is repeatedly characterized as a constricted and constricting space: a space of unparalleled comfort to guests, to be sure, but also one of seething, resentful discrimination, a site that guards a secretive "circle", where esoteric pranks were played and unconniving visitors may not be

re-admitted.[12] The narrator warns us that even for Antony, in his role during the inquest, it will become impossible to contemplate a possible solution "from within The Red House" (64). Antony tries to get Bill "right away from the house" or out of the house on multiple occasions. (67; 104)[13] In a narrative that blends the "haunted house" topos of gothic fiction and the "locked room" formula of detective novels, the house here becomes the embodiment of Mark's manipulative reach, which extends to the chosen members of "the Red House circle" (85):

> Yes. Of course, it's a delightful house, and there's plenty to do, and opportunities for every game or sport that's ever been invented, and, as I say, one gets awfully well done; but with it all, Tony, there's a faint sort of feeling that – well, that one is on parade, as it were. You've got to do as you're told." "How do you mean?" "Well, Mark fancies himself rather at arranging things. He arranges things, and it's understood that the guests fall in with the arrangement. (59)

Later, in a fantasy of claustrophobic role-play, the whole "rum" business of Miss Norris, the actress dressed up as a ghost, carries similarly uncanny undertones (60). And when the body of Robert Ablett is discovered in the study, the narrator lingers on the horror of the scene: not in the stage tones of melodrama, but with an eye on the emotional empathy that such horror evokes: "They turned the body on to its back, nerving themselves to look at it. Robert Ablett had been shot between the eyes. It was not a pleasant sight, and with his horror Antony felt a sudden pity for the man beside him, and a sudden remorse for the careless, easy way in which he had treated the affair." (22).

Another way in which Milne cultivates an atmosphere of unnerving oddity is through the studied contrast in attitude between Antony able and his young friend Bill. Bill's frivolous banter – and his repeatedly tactless "What fun" (58, 78, 93) injects the narrative with meta-commentary on the nature of detective fiction and the quality of its "young" readership, problematizing the conventions of the traditional country house mystery:

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[12] The whole ghost business involving an actress impersonating a dead Lady which causes fright is a gothic feature that adds to the lurking unease of this morbidly confined space (Milne 1922: 60;73)

[13] The inside/outside binary is highly functional to the development of the plot and sets up a powerful symbolic undercurrent. Even a whole chapter is aptly entitled OUTSIDE OR INSIDE? (chapter VI). Features like this do call for separate treatment elsewhere, in the form of a deeper analysis of Milne's beguiling story. Among other features, it was Dorothy Sayers who, in her *Omnibus of Crime* (1928-29) underlined the shifting interplay of multiple viewpoints in Milne's novel (Haycraft 98).

> Bill nodded and walked off in the direction of the pond. This was glorious fun; this was life. The immediate programme could hardly be bettered. […] People were always doing that sort of thing in books, and he had been filled with a hopeless envy of them; well, now he was actually going to do it himself. What fun! (78)

Bill's eager and naive impersonation of his bookish heroes are counterpoints to Antony's bouts of reflection, which yield deeper insights into the characters' motivations and the societal expectations they navigate. By setting up the gravity of Antony's investigation against Bill's flashes of frivolous humour, Milne creates a sense of meta-reflection and disorientation that mirrors the characters' own struggles to make sense of the baffling crime. Bill slowly comes to the disturbing realisation that "it was not just the hot-blooded killing which any man may come to if he loses control. It was something much more horrible. Too horrible to be true." And even though he desperately looks for truth, "it was all out of focus" (121).

Tonal shifts and inversions of register contribute to the overall impression of the Red House as a space of eerie, almost surreal menace, where the boundaries between the mundane and the malevolent, the rational and the irrational, the material and the spiritual are constantly blurred. Milne's Golden Age narrative establishes the spatial, physical boundaries of the country house setting as a symbolic microcosm for exploring the meanders, diversions, and secret passages of human motivation.

4. Mysterium Iniquitatis

I submit that Milne's story works less as a flawed whodunit puzzle than a *howdonit* and *whydunit* tale:[14] as the staging of a deeper epistemological quandary, around the existence of crime itself, its persistence in history and its resistance to fully rationalizing explanations, whatever these may be (historical, sociological,

[14] See the *whodunit*, *howdunit* and *whydunit* entries in *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (1999: 495; 228; 498). The classic detective fiction genre, known as the *whodunit*, revolves around a mysterious death, a limited group of suspects, and the step-by-step revelation of a concealed past. This genre prioritizes the puzzle aspect, encouraging readers to solve the mystery alongside the detective. In contrast, the *howdunit*' variant centres on the murder method. Meanwhile, the *whydunit* is a newer evolution in the genre, incorporating psychological complexity, with the detective focusing primarily on uncovering the motive behind the crime. For an extensive treatment of the "whodunit" category see also Malmgren (2001).

biographical, psychological). In this sense, Milne's *Mystery* taps the venerable reservoir of theological and philosophical reflections on the persistence of evil in the history of Western thought, which resurfaces periodically and, in the case of British literature, is dramatized forcefully on the Early Modern stage, in the troubled idealism of Gothic fiction and Romantic poetry and all the way to the fictionalized Sensations and the first identifiable forms of detective fiction of Late Victorianism.[15] A notable instance of this thread is found in handwritten comments left by Samuel Taylor Coleridge on blank pages, inserted between the printed leaves of his *Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* (1802). Coleridge famously referred to Iago's unfathomable malice as "motiveless Malignity".[16] The Patristic formula of *Mysterium Iniquitatis* (the mystery of iniquity, the unsolvable presence of evil) encapsulates the dispiriting quest for closure shared under different guises but to similar ends in these and many other historical instances. Evil's persistence and reappearance is a "mystery" in the sense that it ultimately baffles understanding, it remains inexplicable, above and beyond society's ability to comprehend it, to break it down into predictable and possibly preventable units of meaning.[17] And mystery of course is uncanny, it is strange. My point here

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15 For a fuller exploration of the rich literary and philosophical lineage prefiguring Golden Age detective fiction's grappling with the problem of evil see Mary Evans' *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*. London: Continuum, 2009. See also Graham, Jacob, and Tom Sparrow, eds. *True Detective and Philosophy: A Deeper Kind of Darkness*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2017; McChesney, Anita. "Detective Fiction in a Post-Truth World: Eva Rossmann's Patrioten." *Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2020); Haliburton, Rachel. *The Ethical Detective: Moral Philosophy and Detective Fiction*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018; Mason Leaver, "The Philosophy of True Detective," *Cinemablography;* Last access July 2024.

16 The British Library holds the annotated copy of Coleridge's "Coleridge's well-known remarks on Iago are provoked by the villain's final speech of Act 1. Responding to lines 1.3.380 – 404, Coleridge writes:

The last Speech, the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity – how awful! In itself fiendish – while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady View. – A being next to Devil – only not quite Devil – & this Shakespear has attempted – executed – without disgust, without Scandal! The meaning of this note is still debated (especially with regard to Coleridge's special use of the word "motive" which partially overlaps our current understanding of it. Nonetheless, Coleridge seems to be suggesting that Iago's wickedness is without clear provocation within the logic of the play. His villainy lacks a clear motive, but arises from sheer delight in the suffering of others. This makes Iago 'fiendish' like the 'devil', yet disconcertingly human." See also: https://shakespeare-navigators.ewu.edu/othello/motiveless.html

17 *Mysterium iniquitatis*, the "mystery of evil" refers to unresolved theological, philosophical, and pastoral debates over the pervasion of evil and suffering that contradicts a world under the providence of the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God of Christianity.

is that Milne's story, like other crime stories especially but not exclusively from the Golden Age of Detective fiction, is built on this unsettling awareness of evil potentially disrupting a precarious order, which Shakespeare, among others, had masterfully dramatized. Literary categories like *whodunit*, *howdunit* or *whydunit* arguably capture different facets, by no means exhaustive in their explanatory attempts, of this lingering concern. The case that *The Red House Mystery* lays before our eyes is described as "rum", an old-fashioned epithet closely associated with the Art-deco style and the setting of Golden Age writing. Etymologically, the term is intriguing because of its probable ties to an ambivalent notion of excellence. By the 1920s, its sense had shifted and very quickly came to mean "strange, bad, spurious, unusual in a strange way"[18] I think Milne's story, like other Golden Age stories that seem at face value formulaic and predictable, draws its enduring appeal from the foregrounding of the "rumness" which, in modes that recalls Freud's uncanny, is very much part and parcel of real life as we know it and experience it. Crime, much like life, is often rum: "unusual in a strange way", implausible, puzzling, unreasonable. If that is the case, narrative implausibility may well be what crime fiction writing calls for: less a flawed stylistic failure than a narrative exploration which strains the limits of credibility and representability to reflect on the ever-perplexing tangle of human motivation in the recurrent, almost mechanical, emergence of crime. And these are themselves contingent – and to some extent containable – manifestations of a deeper, more far-reaching, more pervasive, possibly less containable evil. Chandler seemingly acknowledges the heroism required of an ideal detective to tackle such sweeping undercurrent beyond its manifold actualizations. It must be a redemptive heroism, we have seen, infused with romantic, almost chivalric qualities of honour, honesty and adventurousness; a heroism that in the end trumps the requirements of cool-headed realism, rigorous logic, and even stylistic efficacy initially summoned against Golden Age stories. Chandler may quip that traditional detective stories are "durable as the statues in public parks and just about as dull (223). But even

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For a full discussion of the issue see: "The Mystery of Evil and the Hiddenness of God: Understanding Mystery in Christian Theodicy". 2022. *Vanderbilt Undergraduate Research Journal* 12 (1): 9-16. https://doi.org/10.15695/vurj.v12i1.5294. Last access July 2024.

18 The OED 2nd ed. Charts the evolution of the senses from the 16th century canting term, possibly from Romany, meaning "fine, excellent, great" (so the opposite of queer) to the later meaning of "odd, strange, queer" but also "bad, spurious" which became prevalent after 1800. The Collins Cobuild shows trend chart of *rum* shows a slow but steady decline in use from first attestations of the term in the late 18th hundred to the 2000s. See also https://www.etymonline.com/word/rum#etymonline_v_16628. Last access July 2024.

statues (in public parks or elsewhere) may be as dull as we make them; their faded contours may suddenly regain depth and vividness once we set out probing their histories, starting with the artistic or emotional investment that made them possible. To be sure, the formulaic pattern of traditional detective fiction entails very real dangers of a mindless, mechanical application, of which many instances exist. But Chandler's contention is that things are no different for more accomplished writers of the genre, except for minor differences of degree. The flaw seems inherent in the genre itself:

> And the strange thing is that this average, more than middling dull, pooped-out piece of utterly unreal and mechanical fiction is really not very different from what are called the masterpieces of the art. It drags on a little more slowly, the dialogue is a shade grayer, the cardboard out of which the characters are cut is a shade thinner, and the cheating is a little more obvious. But it is the same kind of book. Whereas the good novel is not at all the same kind of book as the bad novel. It is about entirely different things. But the good detective story and the bad detective story are about exactly the same things, and they are about them in very much the same way" (Chandler 225)

In fact, hard-boiled fiction, with novel ingredients and slick turns of phrase, may be just as formulaic, if not more so, as attested by the frequency and the ease whereby masters of the hard-oiled genre were adapted and continue to be adapted to the glamorised stylistics of Hollywood noir. Chandler acknowledges as much when he mentions his preference for the dull "English style" of traditional detective stories to the latest Hollywood incarnations (231).

Implausibility is the charge Chandler puts forth, after Milne, to dispose rather summarily of Crofts, Sayers and Christie, other celebrated masters of the Golden Age period. Few words of indirect acknowledgement are spared for their style; more trenchant indictments target the tenuous and mechanical arrangement of plots, cardboard characterization and a deplorable recourse to the unlikely props of coincidence and providence. None of this, in Chandler's view, would be found in writers who are actually aware of reality.

5. Spillikins in the Parlor

Milne's puzzle might be flawed, but this alone may not seal the poor stylistic credentials of all Golden Age fiction, at least not as far as realism is concerned. For one, the "rum" dimension, the "strange, bad, spurious, unusual" tone of his 1922 bestseller is arguably calculated, not merely incidental. If that is the case,

the implausibility that Chandler laments may be less an inadvertent consequence of authorial incompetence than a stylistic mark of deeper engagement with darker questions around evil. We do find grit in Golden Age fiction. Chandler conveniently ignores or minimizes the impact of other popular British writers such as Marie Belloc Lowndes (1868-1947), whose seamy, sordid undertones do not sit well with the effete image of cozies Chandler puts forth.[19] Her novel *The Lodger* from 1913 stands as one example among many in this respect, drawing inspiration directly from real life criminal cases, including the infamous Whitechapel murders. Similar instances of gritty writing may be found in the works of her contemporaries such as Lucy Beatrice Malleson (aka Anne Meredith; Anthony Gilbert) (1899-1973), Ellen Wilkinson (1891-1947) or C.E. Vulliamy, especially once we venture beyond the supposed *sancta* of the Queens of Crime.[20] But even within those Golden precincts, things are more twisted that Chandler would have us believe. Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) serves as a prime example of how Golden Age detective fiction can transcend mere puzzle-solving to engage with deeper thematic concerns. The novel's twist–that the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, is the murderer–challenges readers' assumptions about narrative reliability and truth. This subversion is not merely a gimmick but a sophisticated commentary on the nature of deception and trust, both within the narrative and in broader societal contexts. Christie's manipulation of reader expectations and the conventional detective format demonstrates a keen awareness of storytelling mechanics and their implications. Her portrayal of social dynamics and character interactions reflects a nuanced understanding of human psychology, which explores themes of obsession, mental illness, and the impact of societal pressures, thereby adding layers of intricacy to what might initially appear as a straightforward whodunit.[21] Similarly, Dorothy Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930) introduces the recurring character of Harriet Vane, whose fraught relationship

[19] Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1913), inspired by the Jack the Ripper murders, is a key example of a British novel that combines psychological depth with a brusque, realistic portrayal of crime. Vulliamy, writing as Anthony Rolls, produced works like *Scarweather* (1934) and *Family Matters* (1933) that explore the murkier aspects of human nature with a frankness that belies Chandler's characterization of British fiction as either effete or cozy.

[20] Malleson is often praised for powerful characterization and for unusually dark undertones, as seen especially in *Death Knocks Three Times* (1949), but also in the earlier *Portrait of a Murderer* (1934). Wilkinson's The *Division Bell Mystery* (1932) features a murdered Member of Parliament and delves into the sordid world of political intrigue.

[21] On this issue, see Susan Rowland's discussion of crime fiction and psychoanalysis with regard to Christie's *The Hollow* (1946) especially pages 98-99.

with Lord Peter Wimsey evolves across several novels. Their interactions and mutual respect challenge traditional gender roles and highlight the potential for equality and partnership in both personal and professional realms (Rowland 2001: 53). Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935) is another pivotal work that enriches the Golden Age canon with its exploration of gender politics and academic life. Set in an all-female college at Oxford, the novel follows Harriet Vane as she investigates a series of malicious pranks that threaten the institution's stability. Sayers uses this mystery framework to delve into issues of female autonomy, intellectual freedom, and the societal expectations placed upon women.[22] Sayers' narrative does not merely present a puzzle to be solved but interrogates the nature of women's roles in society and academia. The character of Harriet Vane, who struggles with her identity as both a scholar and a woman, embodies the tensions between personal desires and societal obligations. Through Harriet's journey, Sayers critiques the limited opportunities available to women and champions the importance of intellectual and emotional independence (Plain 2001: 102). Both Christie and Sayers exhibit a mastery of characterization that often surpasses the superficial depictions Chandler attributes to Golden Age fiction. For instance, in Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), the diverse cast of characters, each with their own secrets and motivations, reflects a microcosm of society. The novel's exploration of guilt, justice, and retribution forces readers to confront the moral ambiguities inherent in human behaviour.

Chandler's critique, while influential, represents only one perspective on the multifaceted world of detective fiction. The works of Christie, Sayers, and their contemporaries offer rich narratives that engage with social, psychological, and philosophical issues.

6. Chandler's razor

Chandler's contrast between hard-boiled American style and genteel British Golden Age tradition reveals the limitations of his own "realism." The idealized British setting that Chandler inveighs against is a convenient rhetorical target, whose lack of engagement with the realities of life is assumed rather than conclusively demonstrated. His dismissal of Golden Age fiction as mere smoking-room games overlooks the ways these novels also interrogate the boundaries of the genre and the

[22] See Heilbrun 1990: 239-241 and McClellan 2004.

nature of reality itself. Admittedly, this tendency towards oversimplification is not unique to Chandler, but rather a common pitfall in literary criticism.

Umberto Eco's celebrated novel *The Name of the Rose* provides an interesting foil to test unspoken assumptions which motivate Chandler's juxtaposition of a realistic, hard-boiled model against a presumably inferior, less *engagé*, British Golden Age version.[23] In Eco's model of detection (or nearly postmodern anti-detection, as some critics would have it),[24] sleuths perform a debunking role which uncovers and questions orthodox notions of "Truth" in favour of provisional, expedient "truths". This tension is evident, for instance, in William of Baskerville's cynical warning to Adso:

> Fear prophets, Adso, and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them. Jorge did a diabolical thing because he loved his truth so lewdly that he dared anything in order to destroy falsehood (Eco 1983: 549).

Along this path, a detective story becomes, above all, a narrative of progressive demystification: a successful teasing out and piecing together of meaning from mysterious events whose mystery is ultimately bogus. Despite obvious divergences in context, style method, and historical reach, Eco's heroic characterization of William as a rational, empirically-minded detective who ultimately triumphs over the superstitions and dogmas of the medieval world sounds like a biased form of "Occam razoring"; the debunking strategy that underlies Chandler's critique.[25]

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[23] This is not to say that Chandler's critique is entirely without merit, but rather that his division between realism and romance, hard-boiled and cozy, may be more porous than he acknowledges. A more nuanced approach might recognize elements of both in the best examples of each tradition.

[24] This understanding of detection as a provisional, meaning-making act accords with some philosophical approaches to the genre. See for instance Josef Hoffmann's *Philosophies of Crime Fiction* (2013) for discussions of how detective stories engage with epistemological questions.

[25] Differences in reach and emphasis between Eco and Chandler are undeniable. Eco's latter day, Occamistic detective emerges as a consummate debunker in a story that seems written precisely as a critique of the kind of nostalgia-tinged moralizing which Chandler's ideal detective hero appears to be saddled with. A wider treatment of this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper. To an extent, William's role as a debunker who cuts through the fog of religious myths and superstitions in the novel reflects Eco's own Enlightenment-infused bias. By presenting William as a kind of proto-Sherlock Holmes figure who can neatly separate fact from fiction, Eco may be superimposing a rationalist perspective on a historical period that is in fact far more nuanced and multifaceted than such perspective affords.

The reference to Occam's razor here is apt, because it highlights a tendency in both Chandler and Eco to seek the most trenchant, compelling, no-nonsense explanation for the emergence of crime against "cute" or "cosy" accounts. In its popular (and questionable) formulation, Occam's razor holds that "the simplest solution is most likely the right one". Both Chandler and Eco seemingly subscribe to the idea, for their attitudes to detective fiction as both writers and critics champion reductive, rational and "gritty" parsimony over nuance and ambiguity, the latter curtly dismissed by Chandler as stilted efforts to "get cute" with the real facts of crime.[26] Eco's tendency to uphold empirical observation and logical deduction over other forms of knowledge is, in many ways, the flip side of Chandler's insistence on a narrow definition of "realism" in detective fiction. Both perspectives, in their own ways, risk reducing the fraught experience of crime to a set of simplistic binaries: reason vs. superstition, fact vs. fiction, realism vs. artifice.

Works of Christie, Sayers, and other Golden Age writers suggest, instead, that world of detective fiction is rarely so clear-cut, and the most satisfying mysteries are often those that linger on the "rumness" of reality in all its meandering, convoluted forms and manifestations. The best detective stories, from Christie's exploration of the limits of narrative reliability in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to Sayers' interrogation of gender roles and academic politics in *Gaudy Night*, resist purely realistic assumptions.

Of course, the enduring appeal of detective fiction, whether in its Golden Age or hard-boiled incarnations, lies precisely in its ability to navigate these binaries and explore grey areas in between. After all, Chandler himself suggests that the detective's quest for truth is rarely a straightforward matter. The detective genre's ability to thrive despite, or perhaps because of, these epistemological tensions is a testament to its enduring power and relevance. By grappling with the ambiguities

[26] The popular understanding of Occam's razor as a principle of parsimony or simplicity is itself a kind of reductive misreading of William of Ockham's philosophical concept. In its original formulation, the principle of *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* ("entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity") was intended as a methodological guideline for choosing between competing hypotheses, not as a blanket assertion that the simplest explanation is always the correct one. The misappropriation of Occam's razor in much contemporary critical discourse could be seen as a symptom of the same debunking bias that underlies Chandler's and Eco's approaches to detective fiction. An early but compelling treatment of the issue may be found in Thurbrun (1918). See also Kat Medium's. "Why Occam's Razor Is the Ultimate Irony." *Interfaith Now* (blog), January 18, 2022. https://medium.com/interfaith-now/why-occams-razor-is-the-ultimate-irony-dfc6798b2d08. Last access July 2024.

and contradictions of human experience, detective fiction offers us a way to make sense of a world that is often messy, irrational, and resistant to neat categorization. Chandler's razor, like Eco's "postmodern" critique, may ultimately prove too blunt an instrument to fully capture the richness and depth of this literary tradition. Ultimately, Chandler's distinction between a hard-boiled, realistic American tradition and a romanticized, implausible British Golden Age may say more about culturally situated reading expectations and practices than about any inherent stylistic qualities of the texts themselves. Chandler's essay provides a fascinating glimpse into the cultural anxieties and the debates around literary taste that animate the field of detective fiction especially in the first half of the 20th century. His trenchant attack on British stories bespeaks a two-way movement: on the one hand, an effort to aggrandize the status of a popular American genre by emphasizing its uncompromising realism; on the other, a selective itemization of British novels which sets up Golden Age fiction as a monolithic tradition for the precise purpose of finding it wanting on multiple levels.

In fact, Chandler's forceful indictment may reveal a more fundamental, unspoken unease about the underlying kinship between hard-boiled and Golden Age stories, which his discourse strives to keep apart from his own "hybrid" samples. Chandler's reductive focus on Milne, Christie, Sayers and Crofts is noteworthy in this sense. The stylized realism that Chandler champions relies at least in part on conventional notions of virile masculinity which are taken as a given rather than substantively discussed.[27] One may certainly appreciate the emphasis on vernacular style in the hard-boiled tradition; yet this vernacular is heavily gendered and its stylistic merits as a privileged conveyor of truth are assumed rather than conclusively proven. Chandler's championing of realism was entwined with a certain masculine ideal. For Chandler, the hard-boiled detective represented a bastion of rugged individualism and uncompromising integrity in a corrupt world. This notion of masculinity shaped Chandler's literary values, privileging terse, muscular prose and a no-nonsense grappling with the brutal realities of crime and punishment. Golden Age writers, many of whom were women like Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, had to negotiate these gendered expectations. While adhering to the puzzle-mystery format eschewed by Chandler, they nonetheless found ways to subvert gender stereotypes and

[27] Chandler's celebration of the tough, working-class masculinity embodied by his detective heroes has been critiqued by scholars like Jopi Nyman, who argues that this masculine ideal is itself a romanticized construct (Nyman 1997).

infuse their tales with a sly social commentary all their own. Seen in this light, the Golden Age *whodunit* and Chandler's hard-boiled stories represent contrasting but equally vital strands of detective fiction, each grappling in its own way with a world riven by gendered assumptions and expectations. After all, deadly rhythms and the "art of living" are no mean subjects. Confronted with the irreducible "rumness" of existence, with its unaccountable and indelible marks of strange and spurious things, detective fiction may indeed provide an escape; but it is no less serious an undertaking for that, especially if dullness itself is an inescapable feature of how the "art of living" plays out in both fiction and life.[28] One could do worse than find solace or redemption, however fleeting or precarious, in "spillikins", once the game is up.

In light of the above, we may well revisit and to some extent complicate Chandler's opening gambit, according to which all fiction "intends" to be realistic. If that is the case, stylistic and thematic choices, conscious or unconscious, will necessarily reflect different understandings of what realism is and what it entails. Far from being a stable or transparent notion, literary realism will vary depending on when and where it is being applied, and by whom; it will depend on individual and collective perceptions, themselves shaped by the tortuous interplay of multiple social, cultural, economic and political factors. In other words, all fiction may well "intend" to be realistic; whether they succeed or fail in this pursuit is a function of cultural expectations around truth and meaning and their troubled mediation in literary form. Maurizio Ascari has rightly pointed out that "realism is only one of the sets of conventions […] while the realm of fantasy has enabled writers to catalyse and express psychic energies that could hardly find an outlet within the boundaries of verisimilitude". Hence his much-needed focus on the close ties between detective fiction and sensationalism, whose appeal "resides precisely in its hybrid character, combining realism with melodrama" (Ascari 2007: x).

Literary debates and pronouncements such as we find in Chandler, while undeniably fascinating in their own right, are perhaps best taken as symptoms of these wider forces than as definite verdicts on the intrinsic value of different literary outputs. Seen in this light, Golden Age fiction, with its conventionalized reliance on clues, diversions and misdirections, need not be less "literary" or engaged than the hard-boiled school, however forcefully the latter may claim to

[28] In this sense, the "dullness" Chandler decries may be less a failure of the genre than an intrinsic part of its engagement with the monotony and banality of everyday life. As Alison Light notes, the "humdrum" quality of much Golden Age fiction reflects "a recognition that the trivial is as much a part of the truth as passion and violence" (Light 1991: 65).

give "murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons" (Chandler 234). Motives and reasons, as Chandler implicitly recognizes in his romantic depiction of the detective as a redemptive hero, remain fluid and elusive, perhaps more so than any one explanatory model, no matter how carefully crafted, can fully account for. By straining the limits of credibility and realism, and insisting on the "rumness" of crime and mystery, Golden Age writers may well provide a salutary reminder of the ultimate inscrutability of human experience, which no amount of ratiocination or grim style can dispel once and for all. They gesture to the necessary provisionality of any attempt to contain, rationalize, or impose meaning on a world that invariably exceeds total comprehension, but is no less worthy of imaginative exploration for that. The contrasting approaches embodied by Golden Age and hard-boiled novels point to detective fiction's remarkable capacity to interrogate the dense web of human experience from multiple angles.

Ultimately, whether through the Golden Age's intricate puzzles or hard-boiled fiction's unflinching engagement with society's underbelly, detective stories offer something perennially compelling: a space where reason confronts chaos, where–however imperfectly–we might wrest meaning from a world steeped in ambiguity and deception. In Chandler's incisive realism no less than in Christie's deftly contrived enigmas, the detective story becomes a vital lens for examining the human condition in its multiple, baffling convolutions. Championing hard-boiled realism by maligning Golden Age conventions would do disservice to both traditions. We will no doubt keep arguing over "spillikins in the parlor" and garrulous gumshoes, even as we delight in their ability to thrill and move us. For, pace Chandler, art is perhaps all we have to make sense of experience. That, at least, is no mean feat.

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Not So Sweet: Translating and Re-Translating Bianciardi's *La Vita Agra*

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a theoretical consideration of the strategies employed in my translation of Luciano Bianciardi's 1962 novel *La Vita Agra* into English. A brief review of the multiple connotations of context and its relation to translation precedes an attempt to define Bianciardi's literary style and discuss some specific areas of difficulty encountered in rendering the novel's style in English, focusing on grammatical and syntactical equivalence, and the role of Italian dialect. Throughout, Eric Mosbacher's 1965 English translation has been used as a point of comparison. The paper concludes with a more extended discussion of the wider intertextual system in which *La Vita Agra* can be located, and the possible implications this has for a translation of the novel.

Keywords: Luciano Bianciardi, translation, context, style, adaptation

1. Translating Bianciardi/Bianciardi Translating

The cultural image of the translator as subordinate to the author, as "glorying in borrowed plumage" (France 2005: 258) has a long history. This attitude tends to, in Lawrence Venuti's phrase, "completely efface the translator's crucial intervention in the text," and constitutes a "self-annihilation" (Venuti 1986: 179-180). The translator protagonist of Luciano Bianciardi's 1965 novel *La Vita Agra* alludes to a similar predicament when he describes his career; all of the many texts he has translated have "taken something out of me" (Bianciardi 1965: 136).

Translating Bianciardi into English presents no small challenge to the translator, in part because of the subject matter of the novel. It is intimately concerned with the power structures involved in translating, not only in terms of the relations between authors and their translators, but also between translators and their

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editors and employers. The latter act as 'gatekeepers' in *La Vita Agra*, symbols of a cultural élite which Bianciardi satirizes in the novel. A key aspect of Bianciardi's presentation of the narrator (and to an extent, his presentation of himself as a public intellectual in Italy in the 1960s) is that he is an outsider, in overt, and later tacit, opposition to the forces of cultural hegemony which would exclude him and those like him. The translator-protagonist's subordinate, rebellious status in the novel contains an implicit criticism of the way in which a globalized culture constructs translation, particularly translation into English. As a prestigious language of globalization, how is a translator to approach the recontextualization of Bianciardi's novel into English and what role should a translator play in it? What role should the English language play in the translation, given that parts of the source text are already in English? Is the translator, to adopt Schleiermacher's famous distinction, to move the novel towards the target culture rather than away from it, and would that act of translation constitute a 'betrayal' of Bianciardi and his protagonist? Another central problem in translating *La Vita Agra* develops from this sense of alienation from the centres of power and the ways in which it involves the translator. One of the crucial elements Bianciardi uses to establish the protagonist's otherness is linguistic; specifically, in the latter's use of his (and Bianciardi's) native Tuscan dialect. How should a translator approach these problems?

2. Context and Translation

> Just as postwar economic prosperity took 15 years to wend its way from France and Germany to Italy, so Bianciardi's disgust with the mechanized, bureaucratized, cellophane-packaged world accompanying that prosperity is 15 years behind times (Dienstag, 1965).

The New York Times' negative review of Eric Mosbacher's 1965 English translation of *La Vita Agra* demonstrates a certain Anglocentric parochialism. It compares the novel unfavourably with Philip Roth and calls some of Bianciardi's writing about sex a "parody" of D.H. Lawrence's fiction. Such an approach tends to ignore the specifically Italian, mid-twentieth century cultural and economic context of *La Vita Agra*, situating it instead in a well-trod literary landscape of "desexed career women, antiseptic supermarkets peopled by mean-spirited zombies [and] office politics" which would have been familiar to an American audience. However, as the review itself acknowledges, the social changes which transformed Italian society in

the nineteen-fifties and sixties (which will be described in detail in the following sections of this paper) took place years after similar changes in other countries, and Bianciardi's novel may be read in part as a response to those changes.

A successful translation of the novel needs to take its context into account. However, the notion of context contains a variety of meanings. Juliane House has described context as a "highly complex notion, conceptualized in a variety of ways in different disciplines" (House 2006: 342). She characterizes a written text as static, with "in-built temporal and spatial constraints" which does not unfold dynamically in dialogue with another speaker but should rather be seen as a static "stretch of contextually embedded language" (House 2006: 343). The way in which *ex post facto* re-contextualization of a text from one language into another is carried out depends on the type of text which is being translated and the purpose of the translation. House proposes two different models of re-contextualization of a given text: 'overt' and 'covert' translation strategies. An *overt translation* is one which freely admits that it is a translation, while a *covert translation* presents itself as a 'second original' of the source text, without making any acknowledgement to its status as a translated text.

The nature of *La Vita Agra*, its status as a literary novel which is closely bound up with a specific time and place, compels a strategy of overt translation, which in turn obliges the translator to take the novel's contexts into account. My own translation of the novel was constructed within two main contextual frameworks. The first framework has to do with the novel's historical context; that is, the novel's chronological and geographical setting, the social organization which the protagonist, as an outsider in a strange city, must navigate, and the economic impulses which drive his actions in the novel. The second conceptual framework has to do with literary style, the way in which Bianciardi writes the text. These two frameworks are not easily separable, and both inform the strategies I have used in my translation.

Toury contends that "translation is basically designed to fulfil… the needs of the culture which would eventually host it" (Toury 1995: 166). In the case of *La Vita Agra*, I would identify as one of the needs of the target culture a desire for "Italianness"[1], a need to encounter the source culture on the target culture's terms.

[1] I intend the term as a description of a kind of need existing in the target culture for contact with the source culture, mediated by the stereotypes the former has of the latter. The target culture may not want direct contact with this source culture, but satisfy its need through a mediation; in this case, a translation.

House elaborates on this idea by noting that the translator allows target culture readers to "eavesdrop", in that "the translator's task [is] to give target culture members access to the original text and its cultural impact on source culture members" (House 2006: 348), but from the outside, looking in. Readers choose some translated texts to "experience" the source culture in their own language and on their own terms.

3. Bianciardi's style(s)

The translator-protagonist of *La Vita Agra* remarks of the translation process, "*se sei accorto, hai assimilato lo stile e il lessico, e quasi non c'è più bisogno di ricorrere al vocabolario*."[2] An acknowledgement of the need to replicate an author's style has been a constant of translation theory since the classical period. A text's style can and should also be measured by the extent to which it conforms to text conventions, or how it makes use of various conventions for special effect. Literary style is polysemous and semantically dense; even if it uses genre conventions which on a surface reading may appear banal, it is deeply connotative (Carter – Nash 1990: 38-39).

The opening paragraph of *La Vita Agra* is indicative of Bianciardi's dominant style in the novel, and worth quoting in full:

> Tutto sommato io darei ragione all'Adelung, perché se partiamo da un alto-tedesco Breite il passaggio a Braida è facile, e anche il resto: il dittongo che si contrae in una *e* apertissima, e poi la rotacizzazione della dentale intervocalica, che oggi grazie al cielo non è più un mistero per nessuno. La si ritrova, per esempio, nei dialetti del Middle West americano, e infatti quel soldato di aviazione che conobbi a Manduria mi diceva "haspero" mostrandomi il ditone della mano destra ingessato, e io non capivo; ma poi non c'è nemmeno bisogno di scomodarsi a traversare l'Oceano, perché non diceva forse "Maronna mia" quell'altro soldato, certo Merola che era nato appunto a Nocera Inferiore?[3]

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[2] Bianciardi, *La Vita Agra*, 137 ["if you keep your wits about you… you had assimilated his style and vocabulary and hardly needed to use the dictionary."].

[3] Bianciardi, *La Vita Agra*, 9 ["On the whole, I am inclined to agree with Adelung, because if we take as our point of departure a High German *Breite*, the transition to *Braida* is plain sailing, as, indeed, is all the rest – the contraction of the dipthong into an open "e" as well as the rhotaicism of the intervocalic dental, which now, heaven be praised, is no mystery to anyone. It occurs, for example, in the speech of the American Middle West – there was the airman I knew at Manduria, whom I failed to understand when he showed me his middle

The first element to strike the reader's attention is the way Bianciardi's lexis is founded on a contrast between specialized vocabulary and quotidian, conversational interjections which come near to being clichés. The opening disjunct "*tutto sommato*" establishes a conversational tone; as does the use of the conditional "*darei ragione*," communicating a modest hesitancy to impose and polemicize the narrator's opinion; this hesitant tone is prolonged by Bianciardi's use of the interrogative phrase "*non diceva forse…?*". The narrative is propelled by simple words and noun phrases, for instance "*poi*," "*infatti*" giving cohesion to the narrator's thoughts. The light, conversational tone is balanced by the use of specialized vocabulary in the field of linguistics; the narrator is conversant with High German names and demonstrates an understanding of phonetics by citing the "*rotacizzazione della dente intervocalica*." The narrator's tone is also ironic, as can be seen from his use of the hackneyed interjection "*grazie al cielo*" when lauding a more general understanding of rhotacization among the populace. Also, the use of linguistic terminology is not a genuine attempt to fix the etymology of the word "*Braida*," but to characterize the narrator as an intellectual, and to establish the theme of linguistic play in the novel. It also has the effect of mystifying the city; the reader does not know what this *Breite/Braida* place might be. A reader who knows the city of Milan might identify it with the Brera neighbourhood, but the location remains vague, especially when placed in contrast with the specificity of "*Nocera Inferiore*," a town not mentioned again in the novel.

In terms of sentence length and syntax, of particular note is Bianciardi's use of hypotaxis, or chains of subordinate clauses linked in long, elaborate sentences which masquerade as informal, loquacious and open, creating a stream of consciousness style. These long sentences facilitate the passage from one topic to another within the same sentence, in an apparent defiance of conventional rules of logical progression. An example can be seen in the following sentence. The various discourse markers used to give a sense of cohesion to the text appear in bold type, while the various topics touched upon are underlined:

> La si ritrova, **per esempio**, nei dialetti del Middle West americano, e **infatti** quel soldato di aviazione che conobbi a Manduria mi diceva "haspero" mostrandomi il ditone della mano destra ingessato, e io non capivo; **ma poi** non c'è nemmeno bisogno

finger covered with plaster and said *hospiral*. But there is no need to cross the Atlantic, because there was that other member of the armed forces, one Merola of headquarters company, who was born at Nocera Inferiore, and always said *maronna mia* instead of *madonna mia*."].

> di scomodarsi a traversare l'Oceano, **perché** non diceva forse "Maronna mia" quell'altro soldato, certo Merola che era nato **appunto** a Nocera Inferiore?

The reader can follow the progression of the narrator's discourse from linguistics to war to hospitals to dialect pronunciation and back to war again, all linked together with a series of conjunctions to help structure the sentence. Working against this sense of fluidity is the way in which characters, such as the two soldiers, and locations, such as Nocera Inferiore in southern Italy, are introduced and dropped without warning. This creates a jarring, disorienting effect on the reader, who may struggle to recognize a narrative progression in the text. This strategy is fairly typical of Bianciardi's style throughout the novel. It combines with the heterogeneity of Bianciardi's use of writing styles and lexis. It may also be seen as an expression of the disorder that the narrator experiences later on in the novel as he sees, like De Quincey during his opium dreams, endless processions of disjointed, ill-assorted figures in front of him as he tries to sleep (Bianciardi 2013: 140).

The apparent bonhomie of the conversational style is belied by the references to war and illness towards the end of the paragraph, just as the apparently simple conversational style is belied by the judicious deployment of technical language. A translator, then, should focus their efforts on attempting to preserve not one, but a number of different writing styles, blended together to approximate Bianciardi's informal but erudite, light but dark, style.

4. Issues of morphosyntactic equivalence

Baker has noted that "it is difficult to find a notional category that is regularly and uniformly expressed in all languages." For that reason, "differences in the grammatical structures of the source and target languages often result in some change in the information content of the message during the process of translation" (Baker 2018: 97). It is precisely such informational variation tied to morphosyntax that creates issues for translators.

Morphosyntactic divergence can sometimes impair a smooth translation process. For example, Chapter V of *La Vita Agra* opens with the phrase "*Glielo avrò chiesto cento volte*" (Bianciardi 2013: 78). This can be translated literally as "to him/her/it/them it (I) will have asked a hundred times". There is a lack of specificity as to the number and gender of the object of the phrase, but it can be inferred from context that the narrator is referring to his partner, Anna. A further problem is encountered in translating the structure "*avrò chiesto*". The literal

translation "will have asked" is clearly inadequate for the context. Only a good knowledge of the equivalent structures in the two languages can render "I must have asked." This is a relatively simple and obvious case of imperfect alignment between grammatical structures and can be resolved fairly easily by a competent translator. However, problems can arise when working with imperfect equivalents across extended stretches of the text.

Syntactic marking is another important morphosyntactic factor. This refers to the process through which the natural syntax of a given sentence is altered to emphasize a particular element. Baker states that "the less expected a [syntactical] choice, the more marked it is and the more meaning it carries" (Baker 2018: 145). Chapter V of *La Vita Agra* contains the following sentence:

> Se le premo deve scendere, **me lo deve dire lei** *resta*, *non te ne scappare*, *senza di te non posso vivere.*

"*Me lo deve dire lei* resta" deviates from unmarked Italian by including the third-person pronouns "*lo*" and "*lei*", which are normally not required in this context, before and after the two verbs. The protagonist wishes to communicate that the responsibility for resolving his quarrel with Anna rests exclusively on her shoulders, not his. The translation should take account of the extra shade of meaning supplied by the marked syntax and use a structure in English, or manipulate the syntax in English, to achieve as similar an effect as possible. For example, my translation of the passage reads as follows, with an appropriate equivalent to the marked Italian syntax in bold:

> If she cared, she had to come down, **it was on her** to tell me *stay, don't run away, I can't go on living without you.*

An appropriate translation of the various marked sentences in the novel will have to take these syntactic variants into account, recognize elements the author is emphasizing, and find an equivalent sequence in English. This may not always be achievable with syntax alone (Craigie *et al.* 2016: 61).

5. Translating dialect in *La Vita Agra*

The narrator of *La Vita Agra* is, like Bianciardi himself, an immigrant to Milan and northern Italy from Grosseto in Tuscany. Grosseto represented a radically different reality for Bianciardi compared to the social problems he found in the

rapidly industrializing Lombard capital. Grosseto is not mentioned by name in the novel (neither, for that matter, is Milan) but it remains present in the frequent allusions to the protagonist's wife and son, who need to be provided for and represent a source of guilt for the narrator. Bianciardi often uses his protagonist's Tuscan identity to mark him as an outsider in Milan. Pertinently for the translator, this identity is partially expressed through dialect.

The use of dialect in Italian texts can provide the audience with several sociocultural connotations, helping to situate characters in a particular socio-economic context and promoting the formation of stereotypes about that character's personality (Craigie *et al.* 2016: 94). During the 1950s and 1960s, Milan and Turin saw a huge rise in inward immigration from the south of Italy, with an accompanying influx of unfamiliar dialects (Crainz 2003: 12-17). The protagonist of *La Vita Agra* uses some words and expressions of Tuscan origin during the novel, which affect other characters' opinions of him, particularly in terms of his occupation as a translator. For example, in Chapter VIII of the novel he has a meeting with an editor, who comments on the perceived "impurity" of the protagonist's Italian:

> Locuzioni dialettali. Lei ha questo difetto, le locuzioni dialettali, come tutti i toscani, del resto. Per esempio lei traduce: *Bottega di falegname. Bottega* è un toscanismo, no?[4]

The protagonist's Tuscan identity is important in the novel because it serves as a means of reinforcing the reader's perception of him as an outsider, an interloper in a city which does not accept him and which he does not accept. By marking the protagonist as linguistically different, Bianciardi opens him up to criticism on the part of Milan's cultural elite, symbolized in this instance by the widow appraising his work, and who acts as a gatekeeper both to cultural respectability (which the narrator is not interested in) and financial opportunity (which he most definitely is interested in). Bianciardi invests the dialogue with heavy irony in two ways. Firstly, Tuscany is the home region of Dante Aligheri, long associated with linguistic prestige and legitimacy in Italy; the Lombard should, in theory, be taking lesson from the Tuscan, and not the other way around. Secondly, the narrator defends himself, "*trovando non so come il coraggio*," explaining that

[4] Bianciardi, *Vita Agra*, 129 ["'And then there's the question of dialect. You, like all Tuscans in fact, have the fault of lapsing into dialect. You use the phrase *carpenter's shop*, for instance. Isn't that a Tuscanism?"].

the nineteeth-century Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi also uses the word "*bottega*" in his work. She dismisses the protagonist's point about the Romantic poet with a tautological "*'Leopardi era Leopardi',*" but the cultural issues brought up by this interaction remain for the reader and need to be translated for the non-Italian reader.

Lawrence Venuti theorizes an approach to translation which includes Antoine Berman's ethics of translation which "respects cultural otherness by manifesting the foreignness of the source text in the translation" (Venuti 2013: 2). To this ethical notion can be added the imperative to render the sociocultural issues inherent in the novel's treatment of the protagonist's outsider status and perceived cultural inferiority, marked through his voluntary and involuntary use of dialect, clear to the reader. The novel will not be fully accessible unless the character's use of dialect is rendered clearly, or compensated for, in such a way as to limit translation loss as far as possible. Venuti finds a possible solution to this imperative through the techniques of defamiliarization and experimentalism. I have employed the former in my translation of the narrator's "'*toscanismi*," because his non-standard way of speaking is an important signifier in the novel, marking the narrator's foreignness on a linguistic level.

However, dialect is very difficult to replicate effectively in translation, specifically in the question of which target language dialects might correspond to source language ones (Cragie et al. 2016: 94). English has fewer dialects than Italian, and the variations between dialects are more minor in English. Injudicious translation into *another* dialect would run the risk of diminishing the specifically Italian context of Bianciardi's work, which is heavily invested in the economic, social, literary and historical context of Italy and Milan/Tuscany at a very specific point in time. Mosbacher opts to translate the word "'*bottega*'" with a standard English "'*carpenter's shop*'," which can be seen as a valid strategic decision when translating dialect. However, I believe that the issues around dialect in this specific case, and the particular geographical dislocation the protagonist is suffering from in the novel, mean that not adequately representing the foreignness of the narrator's position in relation to his interlocutor constitutes unacceptable translation loss. Venuti defines translators as performing "the crucial role of cultural go-between" (Venuti 2013: 110) and this demands, in this case, that the translator make an attempt to render the linguistic (and by extension geographical, cultural and social) differences between the protagonist and the city's inhabitants. So, how can the passage be translated in such a way that it preserves the Italian

context without creating a stilted, unnatural English text using a corresponding dialect? The answer, I believe, lies in acknowledging the Italy-specific language and considering the context of the conversation the two characters are having in this scene – that is, English-Italian translation itself.

The Anglocentric nature of Mosbacher's translation strategy becomes evident through an examination of an extract from his version of this passage:

> "And then there's the question of dialect. You, like all Tuscans in fact, have the fault of lapsing into dialect. You use the phrase *carpenter's shop*, for instance. Isn't that a Tuscanism?"
> I plucked up the courage to say:
> "I really don't think so. Leopardi speaks of a carpenter sitting up late in his closed shop, and Leopardi was not a Tuscan."
> "All right, all right," the widow replied. "Leopardi was Leopardi. He could permit himself an occasional lapse into dialect." She smiled at me again. "Look, I changed it into more correct Italian and made it carpenter's workshop" (Bianciardi 1965: 123).

The "'more correct Italian'" of "'*laboratorio*'" is rendered as "'workshop'" in Mosbacher's translation. Here, the translation can be said to be effective because it replaces a more general word with a more specific word. The trend is in keeping with how Bianciardi characterizes the pedantic editor who criticizes the protagonist, in that she also offers a more specific substitute in the English translation. However, I would argue that Mosbacher's strategy is too Anglocentric (see Venuti 2013: 121-123) and fails to effectively communicate the specifically Italian context of the scene. The widow may be wrong about the geographical provenance of the word bottega; however, there is no geographical connotation to the English words "shop" and "workshop", just a semantic one. In part, the widow does not offer the narrator a translation job just then because of where he comes from and how he speaks; there is an element of geographical dislocation in his sense of alienation living in the big city.

For these reasons, my translation deviates from Mosbacher's in that I have prioritized the foreignness of Bianciardi's original text. My version of the same passage is as follows:

> "Dialect words. You have the defect of using dialect words – like all Tuscans, come to think of it. For example, you've written: the carpenter's *bottega*. *Bottega* is Tuscan slang, isn't it?"
> "Well, not really, I don't think so," I replied, finding the courage from I don't know where. "Leopardi mentions the woodsman working all night in his *bottega* in one of his poems and Leopardi wasn't from Tuscany."

> "Well," said the widow, "Leopardi was Leopardi. He could afford to indulge in a few dialect words." She smiled again: "Look here, I've changed it to a more Italian *laboratorio*, et cetera."

Firstly, I have retained the original words *bottega* and *laboratorio*, judging that the complex interplay of opinions surrounding these two words on the part of the two characters, situated in a geographical context, is too difficult to translate into English without incurring unacceptable translation loss. *Laboratorio* has a recognisable cognate in English (laboratory) which conserves some of the same sense of a specialized working area and is recognizable to an English reader, even if the etymological cognate of *bottega*, apothecary, is too distant from the Italian meaning to be of much use when presenting the word to an English reader.[5] However, the presence of *laboratorio*/laboratory compensates for this and allows the reader to infer a similar type of working space, emphasized by the word "carpenter". This complex interaction between the Italian and English equivalents allows the reader to access the Italian dimension of the source text, something which is not possible in Mosbacher's translation, while at the same time being afforded the possibility to navigate the strangeness of the Italian words through judicious allusion to an English-language cognate.

I have attempted to preserve the delicate interplay of familiarization and defamiliarization of the text (Bertolazzi 2015: 81) by translating Bianciardi's reference to Giacomo Leopardi, a figure who retains his cultural prestige in Italy to this day, but who is less well-known in the Anglophone world. I wanted to preserve the same sense of cultural cachet that the narrator wants to exploit when alluding to Leopardi's work to defend his choice of the word *bottega*, so I have added an interpolation "'in one of his poems'" to the passage so that a casual reader will be informed of Leopardi's occupation and should be able to surmise that Leopardi was also an important cultural figure (given that the narrator is able to quote from his work from memory, and the widow is disposed to forgive his eccentric use of *bottega* because "*'Leopardi era Leopardi'*"). Mosbacher's translation makes no allusion to who Leopardi was, and so denies the reader immediate access to the cultural context surrounding the novel; in this instance, by defamiliarizing the text, Mosbacher paradoxically makes it less Italian, because he does not grant the English-speaking reader the same cultural access that an Italian reader would generally have.

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5 https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/bottega/

6. Marketing *La Vita* Agra in the United States

To what extent does Bianciardi's work as a translator of texts from English into Italian influence the text of *La Vita Agra*? How far should what Hutcheon calls "the dialogic relations among texts" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2012: xiv) condition an English translation of the novel? The theme of translation is writ large through the novel as a symbol of the protagonist's economic insecurity. *La Vita Agra* can be also read as a composition, in part, of translated texts, which begin to dominate the discourse of the novel towards the end of Chapter VIII. Any prospective translator of the original novel should also take account of the fact that it is deeply concerned with the dynamics and mechanics of the translation process, to the extent that parts of the novel itself are made up of translations of other works from English into Italian and making up part of the fabric of the novel itself. Any analysis of the novel during preparations for translation should take account of this network of allusions and attempt to render it in the target language, in such a way that its implications are comprehensible for a reader in the target culture.

In the *New York Times* review cited at the beginning of this essay, Bianciardi was compared unfavourably to the director Federico Fellini.

> Not only does this novel challenge, in title and theme, "La Dolce Vita," but, unfortunately, the publisher has chosen to emphasize this fact by describing the book as one which, "in the wake of the extraordinary furor over Fellini's 'La Dolce Vita,' became… the rallying point for a whole segment of Italian city dwellers for whom 'the sweet life' was either unattainable or unacceptable." We are further informed that "a successful movie" reminiscent of "Shoeshine" and foreshadowing "8½" was made of it.
>
> It is hard to imagine Luciano Bianciardi's satiric dirge to city life as a rallying point for anyone, even anti-Fellinis. The two men simply aren't in the same league. It's like comparing a Ferrari to a Ford (Dienstag, 1965).

I have quoted this passage extensively because I believe it ties together a series of considerations of *La Vita Agra* and its relationship not only to the general theme of translation but also to other works both of literature but also in other media. I propose now to use it as a starting point for an investigation into the ways in which the novel situates itself in a continuum of other works, and the issues that this might present for a prospective translator.

La Vita Agra was marketed in the United States as a kind of companion piece, or riposte to, Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. This is indeed true – the concordance

between the title of the film and the one which Bianciardi chose for his novel is unmistakable. "*Dolce*" and "*agra*" are antonyms in Italian, and there would be unmistakeable semantic echoes of the film for the average Italian reading the novel. It is also true that the novel's title is an ironic echo of the film's; Fellini's work introduces the audience to the decadent glamour of Rome, while Bianciardi develops a counterpoint of the squalid, grey chaos of Milan in his novel.

The review's ironic quotation of the promotional paratext, which was published on the inside cover in the 1965 edition of Mosbacher's translation (Bianciardi 1965), notes specifically that *La Vita Agra* appeared "in the wake of the extraordinary furor" that Fellini's film attracted, and further claims that a significant segment of Italian society – presumably the victims of the boom, the precarious, the exploited – have chosen to identify with the book rather than with Fellini's film. This claim is rubbished in the review ("it is hard to imagine… [the novel] … as a rallying point for anyone") but still gives a valuable insight into the ways in which Viking Press, the publishing house responsible for the English-language version of the novel, hoped to ensure its commercial success by placing it into a relationship with a well-known contemporary Italian cultural export. The necessity of doing so is comprehensible in terms of the financial viability of publishing a translation of a novel into English; Lawrence Venuti has remarked upon "the appallingly low volume of anglophone translations since the Second World War, now just over 2% of annual book output according to industry statistics." One can imagine how a establishing a connection with Fellini's film might have seemed like an effective way of attracting the interest of the American book-buying public who, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Anglophone world, "have formed aggressively monolingual readerships" (Venuti 2013: 158-159).

The strategy seems to have been unsuccessful, judging from the *Times*' review and its unflattering comparison between the director and the novelist. The chief difficulty in replicating the association of Bianciardi's novel with Fellini's film in an English-language context is the fact that the film title *La Dolce Vita* has survived the translation into the target language unchanged. Indeed, the film is known in the Anglophone world by its original Italian-language title. The same privilege was only half-afforded to *La Vita Agra* by Viking in their 1965 edition of the novel. The original title remains, just like Fellini's film preserves its original title. However, it is followed by Mosbacher's English translation of the title; *La Vita Agra / It's a Hard Life / a novel*. This preserves the novel's specifically Italian

context for the English-language reader, while affording them an insight into what the Italian words mean, specifically the adjective "*agra*", which would not be as familiar to an English-language reader as the more widely known "dolce". However, the translator has incurred a major loss of meaning by rendering the title as "It's a Hard Life", because it loses the antonymic association of "bitter" ("*agra*") and "sweet" ("*dolce*") and thus moves the translated text definitively away from its association with *La Dolce Vita*.

The review's metaphorical description of Fellini as a Ferrari car makes use of an Italian cultural referent widely familiar in the United States, all to Bianciardi's detriment when he is unflatteringly compared to a Ford.[6] The comparison between the two men and their work is implicit in the marketing around the novel in the US. Therefore, not only is the novel a reply to an existing, successful film; it has also become successful, and can be compared to a further film (*Shoeshine*), and also anticipates a third (*8½*), which will be made by Fellini himself. In this way, the novel is enmeshed in a web of references to other works, all of which help to guide the prospective purchaser of *La Vita Agra* towards an informed understanding of that work through cultural context. The reasoning behind Viking's sales strategy is clear; the implicit initial association with Fellini can easily be overlooked by an Anglophone reader, the context lost, and the meaning of the work diminished. Venuti has written of the way in which the translation process "so radically decontextualizes the source text that a translation can be hard for a reader to appreciate on its own" (Venuti 2013: 160-161). It is part of the translator's task to preserve this wider context, too.

Mosbacher's original title in English, "It's a Hard Life," neglects to establish an implied connection with Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and thus diminishes the novel's intertextual reach. By entitling my translation of the novel "The Bitter Life," I have been able to re-establish the allusion to the film, as well as more accurately reflecting the tone of the original. The use of the adjective "bitter" is more specific than Mosbacher's "hard"; what is more, the omission of the dummy-pronoun and indefinite article "it's" gives a harder, less comical edge to the title.

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[6] It is interesting that the reviewer compares Bianciardi to the utilitarian, unexciting Ford, rather than an Italian car, which would have made more sense in terms of the Italian basis of the comparison. It might be accepted that she chose Ford for the euphony of its alliteration with Ferrari (even if the brand name Fiat also begins with an F) but also demonstrates the hostile cultural terrain in which a novelist translated into English had to, and perhaps still has to, operate.

7. Translating English into English

The biographical information on Bianciardi at the end of the Viking edition of *La Vita Agra* notes that "Bianciardi is himself the translator into Italian of more than a hundred books, among them works by Faulkner, Steinbeck, Henry Miller, Saul Bellow, and J.P. Donleavy" (Bianciardi 1965). The authors Bianciardi translated during his career left their mark on his style as an author (Corrias 2011: 149-153). His own work as a translator, as we have seen, deeply informs both the plot and the social criticism of *La Vita Agra*. I would like to take some space to consider the importance of translation in making up the fabric of the work, and to think about the challenges which translation in the novel poses for the translator.

Due to the protagonist's translation work, *La Vita Agra* features English text, or translations into Italian from other English-language texts, from Chapter V onward. The preceding chapters feature sentences written in other languages; for example, Chapter I features sentences written in Latin, French, German and Piedmontese dialect. In each case I have mostly followed Mosbacher in retaining the original foreign-language text, once supplemented with a translation in the footnotes, to maintain the same distancing effect that the original text would have on the Italian-language reader. As the novel progresses, the volume of foreign-language text or its translation into Italian increases, culminating in a paragraph of English text at the end of Chapter VIII, symbolizing the way in which the protagonist's work as a translator has parasitized his life.

I have already mentioned the protagonist's meeting with the widow-editor in Chapter VIII when deciding how to translate dialect words. The passage presents a further challenge, in that the two characters are discussing the best way to translate a text from English into Italian. This may not present much of a challenge for, say, a German translation of the novel. The translator could translate the Italian text and preserve the English in the original. How, though, should the English-language translator tackle such a text?

The following exchange from the novel is representative of the problem:

> Mi raccomandò di tenermi fedele al testo, di consultare spesso il dizionario, di badare ai frequenti tranelli linguistici, perché in inglese *eventually* per esempio significa finalmente… (Bianciardi 2013: 126).

How can the translator render "eventually" into English, given that it is an English word, without losing the sense of foreignness which the word would have for a reader in the source culture? Mosbacher translates as follows:

> She told me to stick close to the original, to use the dictionary continually, and to watch out for the linguistic traps that are so frequent, such as the English word *eventually*, for instance, which means *at last* and not *possibly*, as one might suppose from the Italian form of the word… (Bianciardi 1965: 121).

He has retained Bianciardi's use of the word "eventually" and interpolated a short explanation of the difference in meaning between English *eventually* and Italian *eventualmente*, thus reinforcing the notion that English is a foreign language to the two characters and reminding the reader that the scene is set in an Italian context. Such an approach, while helping to locate the exchange in the right context, might be thought of as heavy-handed; the reference to "the Italian form of the word" simultaneously reminds us that the language we are reading is foreign and not-foreign, creating a tension in the illusion that we are reading Italian. I have tried to preserve the foreignness of the exchange by reversing the languages, and inserting an Italian word in place of the English one:

> She enjoined me to remain faithful to the original text, to consult my dictionary often, to be careful of common linguistic traps, because *eventualmente* didn't mean 'potentially' in English…

By slightly changing the sense of the text to specify what *eventualmente* does not mean in English, I have attempted to respect the pact between reader and writer. I situate the novel more clearly in an Italian context, and preserve the frisson of uncertainty a reader with no Italian would experience on encountering a foreign word, just as an Italian reader with little or no English would encounter on seeing an English word disrupt the flow of the text.

8. Intertextuality in *La Vita Agra*

Chapter VIII ends with an extended meditation on the city of Dublin and its surroundings, which represent an escape for the protagonist compared to the grey reality of life in Milan. The protagonist loses himself in the narrative voice of the work he is translating, imagining himself to be a character living in Dublin. The chapter ends with an extended paragraph entirely in English:

> … poi il ritorno, dalla parte del camposanto di Scrub, nella grande pianura *open to winds and to strangers. Then from everywhere crowds had rushed to this newly-found Mecca: black dealers from the South, carrying suitcases filled with oil, speculators from the North, determined to start new enterprises in this promising area, prostitutes, shoeblacks, tramps, ballad-singers, pedlars of combs and shoe-laces, fortune tellers with*

> *a parrot and an accordion, and little by little all the others: land officers, policemen, insurance brokers, craftsmen, school teachers and priests* (Bianciardi 2013: 141).

Morini has noted that the "paragraph comes at the very end of a chapter in which the narrator's recounting of the facts of his life has progressively given way to the invading power of translation." The switch from Italian indicates a sense of the protagonist's loss of control over his language; ground down by his profession, the story he is telling is vulnerable to being taken over by other narratives and other languages. However, the "impression of utter bewilderment… is just that – an impression" (Morini 2020: 132-133). The English text at the end of the novel is itself a translation from Bianciardi's novel *Il Lavoro Culturale* (1957)[7]. Just as later on, Lizzani's film adaptation of *La Vita Agra* would include elements from *L'Integrazione*, so Bianciardi's novel includes translations of his other work. A translation should reflect this tendency to intertextuality in the novel. Mosbacher retained the (translated) English text in his translation, whereas I have decided to restore Bianciardi's original Italian text. This helps once more to preserve the sense of foreignness in the text that the Italian reader would also encounter. Morini has explained how Mosbacher believed this passage came from the Irish-American novelist J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1955) and so left it in the English translation. Restoring the Italian text accentuates the interlinguistic games which Bianciardi is playing with the reader.

Other texts also make appearances in *La Vita Agra*, each bringing its own set of connotations to the text. For example, in Chapter V, the protagonist and Anna work on a translation of the British-Indian novelist Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). The passages which they translate concern the birth of the narrator's child, Irawaddy. Bianciardi's narrator translates the novel into Italian, discussing translation choices with Anna: "'*Dunqu*e, la chiamammo Irawaddy, che è il nome di uno dei grandi fiumi dell'Asia, perché la cosa più preziosa… *No, anzi, aspetta. Sarà meglio dire così:* di tutte le cose l'acqua era per noi la più preziosa'" (Bianciardi 2013: 89).

Mosbacher identified the novel alluded to as *Nectar in a Sieve*, and replaced Bianciardi's translation with the original text, a choice which I have followed. I believe that using the original language helps to preserve the intertextual link with Markandaya's novel. However, I also believe that preserving this link does more than

[7] Morini has commented on the way in which the text, depending on whether it is read in Italian or English, has connotations for the reader with Grosseto or Kansas City, which was Bianciardi's nickname of friendly contempt for his home town (Morini 2020: 132-135).

give an insight into the translation process as experienced by Bianciardi's narrator; it also echoes, and comments on, events and settings in *La Vita Agra* itself.

Nectar in a Sieve has not been adapted, strictly speaking; rather fragments of the text have been taken from the novel and integrated into another text. The receiving text therefore receives a certain colouring from the donor text. The receiving text makes a comment on itself by using the donor. In this case, the comment is implicit. *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in India, and concerns the vicissitudes of Rukmani and her farmer husband, Nathan, as their town is rapidly industrialized and the land which they live on becomes ever more difficult to farm. Rukmani grieves as she sees "the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from the town" (Markandaya 2023: 74), but then stoically accepts the change and moves to the big city to look for her son. The parallels, ironic and not, with *La Vita Agra* are obvious. Bianciardi's narrator also sees the ill effects of industrial and urban growth; however, he does not accept the situation stoically, and indeed moves to the city to escape his family, rather than seek to be reunited with it. The parallels are implicit, nor does Bianciardi offer any help to the reader in identifying the text. However, this does not negate the fact that *La Vita Agra* exists in a continuum made up of other texts, and that an effective translation will follow Mosbacher in attempting to identify and retain the texts Bianciardi uses to preserve the novel's intertextual dimension.

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Beyond the Icon, Beyond the Human: An Ecocritical Reading of Francis of Assisi across Irish and British Poetry (1960s-2010s)

Abstract
This paper explores the presence of Francis of Assisi across Irish and British literature from the 1960s to the 2010s, through the study of a poetic trajectory centring on a popular episode in his hagiography known as 'the preaching to the birds'. Through an ecocritical lens, my analysis investigates how this narrative entails the theme of human–nonhuman relationality revealing the 'mature environmental aesthetics' of the poems under examination alongside the rise of ecological discourses in the contexts of their publication. By analysing five poems by different authors – Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley (1960s), and Paula Meehan and Ann Wroe (1990s-2010s) – this essay gauges how poetic renderings of Francis, beyond mere simplistic assessment of his 'iconic' status in contemporary culture, testify to his efficacy, as a poetic subject, to engage with current debates in the environmental humanities. Specifically, I discuss how, in the selected poems, Francis fosters a paradigm shift to still-dominant mental and physical habits that have led to the Anthropocene in conceiving humans and nonhumans beyond anthropocentric, dualistic figurations, while acknowledging forms of ontological and material continuity among them.

Keywords: Francis of Assisi, preaching to the birds, ecocriticism, human–nonhuman relationality, posthumanism

1. Introduction

That Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226) represents a popular cultural *icon*[1] is undoubted. Since the Middle Ages, there have been many works, in different fields, dedicated to the saint, which have contributed to shedding light on *il Poverello*'s attentiveness to fraternity and poverty (Cook 2008), as well as

[1] This concept is intended to denote 'a person or thing considered a representative symbol', as defined by the OED (2024).

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to his deep connection with creation (Johnson 2011), among other matters.[2] After more than 800 years since the establishment of the Franciscan order, the saint's appeal for artists of different kinds shows no signs of fading: the ever-growing production of cultural narratives–visual, textual, and performative–dedicated to his life, lifestyle, and spirituality are representative of his continuous reinterpretations (Golozubov 2015) and readaptations through different media, including film,[3] opera,[4] drama (Bower 2009), and even comics (Gasnick 2024 [1980]). As Cynthia Ho, John K. Downey, and Beth Mulvaney observe, 'the future of Francis is also the future of retellings and representing his story in other genres and religious climates' (2009: xii).

Literature has also contributed to both Francis' popularity and his cultural impact, especially within a 'mature environmental aesthetic'.[5] In the Irish and British context, a trajectory can be identified since the 1960s that entangles Francis, as a poetic subject, with the topic of human–nonhuman relationality hand-in-hand with the rising environmental discourses developing in that period. In a time such as the one we live in, where the effects of major anthropogenic alterations of planet earth have been unequivocally connected to specific (anthropocentric, dualistic, etc.) mindsets and lifestyles, production practices, consumption habits, and, in general, to human actions,[6] rethinking the paradigm underlying today's socioeconomic dynamics is a necessity.[7] By referring to a specific episode of

2 On Francis's legacy in art, literature, spirituality, and other fields, see Franco – Mulvaney (2015).

3 Among the most popular cinematic adaptations of the life of Francis are Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco Giullare di Dio* (1950) and Franco Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972), as listed on IMDb (2024). As of today, the tag 'Saint Francis of Assisi' on IMDb lists 32 productions, including movies, documentaries, and series that are dedicated to or reference Francis (IMDb 2024).

4 For instance, consider Olivier Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise (scenes franciscaines)*, which premiered on 28 November 1983 (McClain 2009).

5 With this expression, Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in ecocriticism, emphasised the need for narratives that illuminate environmental issues through an integrated, ecological understanding of humans and nonhumans, rather than a simplistic discussion of the environment (Buell 1995: 32).

6 While recognising different responsibilities depending on countries, practices, and individuals.

7 This type of action, often advocated by various disciplines and fields of knowledge, finds a useful framework in the posthumanist perspective. This perspective is valuable for attentiveness towards challenging dualistic, anthropocentric, and speciesist assumptions–among others–as essential tools to rethink the axioms that have led to the Anthropocene.

the life of Francis, commonly known as 'the preaching to the birds',[8] the poetic trajectory under examination highlights the ways Saint Francis supports and fosters a revision of rooted anthropocentric dualistic figurations of humans and the environment, while also encouraging more ethical forms of relationality.

As observed by Timothy J. Johnson, Thomas of Celano (c. 1185 – c. 1265) was one of the earliest hagiographers 'to perceive the saint's sibling relationship with creatures' (Johnson 2011: 147) since the Middle Ages. The 'preaching to the birds', featuring, among other Franciscan sources, in Celano's *Vita Prima*, describes Francis addressing the animals, praising them for their divine goodness in relation to their existence, and reminding them 'of the incredible benevolence the Creator showered upon them', while imploring 'all animals, and even inanimate creatures, to praise and love their Creator' (Johnson 2011: 147). In the *Legenda Maior*–another relevant early biography by Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274)–similar episodes are reported in which Francis interacts with birds. These include references to the preaching to the birds where Francis addresses the animals, often calling them 'brothers', urging them to praise the Lord and inspiring in them fascination, attraction, and excitement (Paolozzi 2011: 686). While these stories have often been interpreted allegorically (Sand 2014: 221), as references to Francis's attention towards poor and marginalised people, recent ecocritical approaches allow for a different reading: they reassess the specificities of the human–nonhuman relationship portrayed by the episode, in light of current discussions on relational ethics in the Anthropocene.

This paper follows the latter approach by focusing on selected poems published between the 1960s and 2010s and pivoting on the episode of the preaching to the birds. While acknowledging the differences between the social, cultural, and religious specificities of the Irish and British contexts, this joint study will underscore similarities in the development of these Franciscan narratives across decades, as a transcultural and transnational phenomenon.

(Critical) posthumanism recognises an ontological and material connection between humans and nonhumans, compelling one to reconsider long-standing and rooted predatory attitudes towards the natural world. Additionally, this critical perspective highlights how these assumptions foster an exclusionary view of 'the human' as a subject, rooted in a Eurocentric, white, male worldview–thus marginalising other subjectivities (Braidotti 2019; Ferrando 2019).

[8] This episode is reported in various Franciscan sources, the most relevant of which are Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima* (Chapter 21), *I Fioretti* (*The Little Flowers*, Chapter 16), and Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior* (Chapter 12). See Paolazzi (2011).

The first part of this paper will be dedicated to contextualising Francis within Irish and British literature and culture by briefly elucidating the development of his popularity from the earliest traces to more recent expressions. This section also assesses Francis's relevance in recent discourses regarding contemporary ecological urgencies. In contrast, the second part of this essay offers an ecocritical analysis of the 'preaching to the birds' episode in the five selected poems. Based on the year of their compositions and publications, this section gathers the case studies into two groups: a) three poems from the 1960s (by Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley) and b) two poems published after the 1990s (by Paula Meehan and Ann Wroe).

2. The Spread of Franciscanism in Irish and British Culture: A Brief Account

Francis of Assisi is a long-standing presence in both Irish and British history. The earliest traces date back to the 13th century in the context of the spread of Franciscanism in Europe (Robson 2017: 25-26). On 10 September 1224, a group of nine friars reached England to lay the foundations of the first English province of the order (Robson 2017: 3). The success of the Franciscans in England was such that, by 1228, the first Province of London was further divided into Custodies (Robson 1997: 1). Thirty years after the arrival of the first friars, their number had grown to 1,242, a figure destined to increase due to their successful integration into the English church, and, in general, into the culture of the country over the next few decades. Similarly, in Ireland, the first convent was reportedly built in Youghal in 1224; six years later, the number of convents made it possible to establish a Province, leading to widespread success with one hundred convents in the country over time (Father Rudolf 1924: 126-127). Overall, the development of Franciscanism in England paralleled the one in Ireland.

With the Reformation, however, the rising popularity of Franciscanism came to a sudden halt. Following the Franciscan opposition to Henry VIII's divorce and to his supremacy over the papacy, the King issued a decree in 1534 ordering 'the arrest of Franciscans and the seizure of their friaries' (Borgia Steck 1920: 60). The harsh implementation of such a decree, occasionally entailing torture and murder, also led to the acknowledgement of the first martyrs of the order in England in subsequent years. Although the common people were initially disappointed by the suppression of the Franciscans, the movement progressively lost influence in the region, in part because the new Anglican religion grew

increasingly indifferent to the worship of saints. Yet after the Reformation, narratives dedicated to Francis in England did not fully disappear. Attention on him remained, albeit primarily in the form of delegitimisation. For instance, in the popular work by Bartolomeo Albizzi titled *The Alcaron of the Barefote Friars* (1542), reprinted in multiple editions until the 19th century, Francis was dismissed as 'the quintessential popish idol' (Heimann 2017: 406). Another example is Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1604), where the devil Mephistopheles disguises himself as a friar in Act 1, Scene 3, at the command of the protagonist: 'Thou art too ugly to attend on me. Go and return an old Franciscan friar; That holy shape becomes a devil best' (Marlowe 1993 [1604]: 127).

Throughout the Enlightenment, the decline of Francis continued, on account of what Mary Heimann describes as a general 'fashionable distaste for medieval miracles and widespread aversion to mendicant and contemplative orders, combined with the low reputation into which Franciscan communities on the European continent had sunk' (2017: 406). Over time, this transformation reduced the scope of *il Poverello*, who came to be primarily discussed as a distinctive topic of Roman Catholic doctrine and as a mystical phenomenon.

This situation finds a turning point only in the Victorian Age[9] when Francis was rehabilitated thanks to the Oxford Movement,[10] which sought to renew Roman Catholic thought and practice within the Church of England. Apart

[9] This observation is based on the studies of Mary Heimann, who primarily focused on the development of English devotion to St. Francis and its transformations. She illustrates how 'the rise in devotion to St. Francis became a significant feature of English spirituality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'. Heimann notes several aspects, including that as 'a saint who boldly preached and lived the gospel, Francis appeared to earnest Victorians to offer a timely rebuke to those tendencies of which they were the most ashamed: materialism, the loss of "simple faith", and uneasy doubts about the reality of the supernatural dimension of life' (Heimann 2017: 409). Unless otherwise indicated, Heimann is the main source for this section.

[10] The Oxford Movement, initiated at the University of Oxford within the Church of England, aimed to reaffirm the catholic heritage of Anglicanism. Also known as Tractarianism, its philosophy was expressed through a series of influential publications from 1833 to 1841, which outlined the movement's beliefs and principles, asserting that Anglicanism was not merely a Protestant denomination but a branch of the historical Christian Church. These tracts also addressed issues related to liturgy, prayers, sacraments, and other devotional practices. This movement significantly influenced the development of Anglo-Catholicism. For a further discussion on the Oxford Movement, see Brown – Nockles (2012); Brown – Nockles – Pereiro (2017).

from the Oxford Movement, literature at large contributed to reviving interest in Francis with biographic works that became widely popular.[11] A case in point is Margaret Oliphant's 1868 biography of Francis, written for the first Protestant series on the saint, which, by gaining popularity beyond Catholics, touched upon 'Victorian sensibilities more generally' (Heimann 2017: 412). Oliphant, whose work was 'drenched in the [British] Romantic spirit', maintained that the saint was 'a man overflowing with sympathy for man and beast' and that he 'was relevant to her contemporaries' (Dunstan 2011: 275), thus underscoring a rising tendency to stress Francis' relationship with the nonhuman realm since the early English hagiographies.

Swiss Calvinist Paul Sabatier's *Life of St. Francis* (1894) was another pivotal publication: not only did this book go into forty-five editions but it also provided the public with a more secularised depiction. Starting from the 1890s, the effect was the cultural popularisation of an array of publications appreciating Francis in a range of different cultural contexts and revisions, including 'Francis the troubadour, Francis the poet, and Francis as the subject of Giotto's paintings or Dante's verses' (Heimann 2017: 414). As Heimann observes, this process led to a real 'explosion of interest in St. Francis of Assisi' (2017: 417) at the turn of the century:[12] the presence of Francis in WWI British discourse, as visible in the spread of the Prayer of St. Francis[13] among families and soldiers during the conflict, is further proof of the rootedness of Francis in early twentieth century British culture.

By this time, hand-in-hand with the slow but steady rising of a proto-environmental sensibility in the country,[14] Francis also begins to be more systematically associated with 'green' topics.[15] On a more literary level, one can

[11] It is the case of Frederick William Faber's 1847 translation of L.F.C. Chalippe's *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*, acknowledged as one of the first biographies of the saint in England during the period. Similarly, the publication of the first English edition of Francis's *Little Flowers* by Henry Edward in 1864, followed in 1867 by an edition of St. Bonaventure's *The Life of St. Francis of Assis*i, further renewed interest in the saint in England (Heimann 2017: 417).

[12] This process was not exempt from controversies, including critiques of Roman Catholicism regarding secularised attitudes towards Francis (Heimann 2017: 418).

[13] Albeit incorrectly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

[14] In recent years, a growing focus on 'greening' Modernism has led to a revival of environmental themes in several early twentieth-century texts (Sultzbach 2016; Black 2017; Hegglund – McIntyre 2021). This trend bears witness to an increasing awareness of ecological themes in various literary forms of the period, including poetry (Rozzoni 2021).

[15] For example, during a convention of ecologists in Florence in 1931, it was decided to designate 4th October, St. Francis of Assisi's feast day, as 'World Animal Day'.

consider G.K. Chesterton's popular 1923 biography, titled *St. Francis of Assisi*, where emphasis is laid on pastoral and environmental imagery.[16] A similar example is offered by the words of Charles Raven (1885-1964), Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1932 to 1950, who in the 1930s noted that 'it is probably his enthusiasm for the brotherhood of birds and beasts, more than the stigmata, that for us [Protestants/Anglicans] sets the seal upon his saintliness'.[17]

A full exploration of the complex sociocultural, political, and historical *milieu* of Irish and English Catholicism[18] is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth reporting the contribution of Franciscans to the process of the Counter-Reformation, especially through their activity in major European universities in the 17th century, where they fostered a resurgence of the movement in the following centuries. Even though by 1817, the Irish Franciscan province was about to dissolve (Bhreathnach – Macmahon – McCafferty 2009), Franciscan spirituality did not succumb. On the contrary, after WWI, the Irish Franciscan Order proved to be culturally influential in the context of post-independence Ireland. As Mary E. Daly posits, the period from 1918 to 1963 represents a true 'second golden age' for Irish Franciscanism, marked by new vocations, structures, and cultural influences, up to the Second Vatican Council, where the spirit of renewal inevitably led to challenges in adapting Franciscanism to ever-new, contemporary necessities (Daly 2023).

3. Francis of Assisi in Contemporary Culture

As Heimann observes, 'by the late 1960s, the "Prayer of St. Francis" had become a familiar sight on countless tea-towels, post-cards, and posters of sunsets and beaches' (2017: 219). These words show that Francis' popularity in the examined context extended well beyond the arts, influencing a variety of (popular) cultural expressions. This trend continued in the following decades, when Francis surfaces

16 See the following clarificatory passage from Chesterton's biography with its reference to classical pastoral tropes from ancient Greek and Latin culture (Arcadia), where he declares: 'I too have lived in Arcady, but even in Arcady I met one walking in a brown habit who loved the woods better than Pan' (Chesterton 1944: 16), mentioned in Heimann (2017: 418).

17 This quote refers to Cowley (1933: vii), as mentioned in Dunstan (2011: 277).

18 For a further discussion on the differences between British and Irish culture based on their different cultural and spiritual backgrounds, see, among others, Hempton (1997); Dworking (2012); Bray (2021).

in many other fields, including political discourses[19] and narratives dedicated to the British monarchy.[20]

The 1960s represent a milestone in this process since, as already mentioned in the introduction, they testify to the academic resurgence of interest in Saint Francis entangled with the rising environmental discourse, of which the publication of Lynn White Jr.'s seminal essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, in 1967 remains a pivotal example. While exploring the influence of the anthropocentric legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition on past and present appreciation of the environment, White highlights Francis's different 'ecological' vision. Specifically, White notes that Francis proposed 'an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it; he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, with the idea of man's limitless rule of creation' (White 1996 [1967]: 14). With White's work, the saint became (provocatively) popularised in academia as the 'patron saint of all ecologists' (White 1996 [1967]: 14), a recognition later officialised by Pope John Paul II in 1979 (Pope Ioannes Paulus 1979). White's vision can therefore be considered a witnessing to a 'mature environmental' (Buell 1995: 32) figuration of Francis as a model for alternative approaches to the natural world and its relationship with human beings.

While White's assumptions have not been exempted from critical scrutiny and subsequent revisions (Jedan 2017; Brown – Volk – Wallsgrove, 2023), his essay favoured an ecological understanding (and popularisation) of Francis in the following years as shown by the publication of a number of academic works based on the same premises. For instance, one can consider the investigation of the interplay of nature and mysticism in Francis, as explained by Edward A. Allworthy (1973), or Steven Rockefeller's study (1992) on the intertwining of faith and ecological thought. Roger D. Sorrell (2010), on the other hand, discusses how Francis has influenced Christians' attitudes towards the natural world, while Gillian Rudd, among other

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[19] Margaret Thatcher's mention of Francis in her 1979 election victory speech is worth reporting: 'I would just like to remember some words of St. Francis of Assisi which I think are really just particularly apt at the moment. "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope" …' (Thatcher 1979), cited in Heimann (2017).

[20] Reference to Francis of Assisi surfaced in a song sung at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 (*Make me a channel of your peace*) whose planetary broadcast becomes a powerful illustration of Francis's rootedness in British religious and secularised contexts (see Heimann 2017).

scholars, considers Francis's 'sense of connection not separation between humans and the rest of creation' (Rudd 2014: 29). Interestingly, the inclusion of White's essay in Glotfelty and Fromm's seminal collection *The Ecocriticism Reader*, published in 1996, gave further relevance to Francis in the context of environmental subjects on the verge of the ecocritical movement: a similar perception has been later corroborated by several studies exploring Francis's presence in literature (Siewers 2009; Chrulew 2016; Alphonsa 2018) with regard to issues concerning human–nonhuman relationships, including plants, animals, and other entities.

The election of Jorge Bergoglio to the papacy in 2013 fostered this development. The influence of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* promulgated in 2015 is a good example: with its title taken from the incipit of Francis's famous *Canticle of Brother Sun*–the popular prayer and poem in which Francis celebrated God for different aspects of creation–the document has become seminal in assessing the saint, and the Franciscan ethics, in general, as 'the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically' (Pope Francis 2015). This Encyclical Letter can also be seen as a way to acknowledge Franciscan ethics as a source of inspiration for responses to issues such as pollution, climate change, sustainability, and related social challenges: not only did *Laudato Si'* have multiple effects on culture and society in regard to these urgencies–including the rise of a worldwide movement and large media impact[21]–but it also became a popular topic in academia[22] in different areas including posthuman philosophy. As philosopher Rosi Braidotti observed, this document can be seen as Pope Francis's 'supplementing Catholic dogma on Natural Law, with Naomi Klein's analysis of the destructive role of Capitalism' (2019: 66). Along this line, and in the context of Irish and British culture, there has also been a resurgence of Francis within environmental discourse, both inside and outside the Catholic Church.[23]

Complementing this trend is *The Economy of Francesco*, an international movement of young economists, entrepreneurs, and change-makers initiated in 2019; it followed an invitation from Pope Francis to convene in Assisi (Pope Francis 2019) in order to engage with leading economists worldwide with a view

[21] For a further illustration of the *Laudato Si' Movement* and its cultural influence, see https://laudatosimovement.org/who-we-are/

[22] For studies dedicated to the Encyclical Letter, see, amongst others, Dale (2015); Zhang (2016); McKim (2019); Buckley (2022).

[23] For a further discussion on this topic, see the website of The Catholic Church. Bishops' Conference of England and Wales indicated in the bibliography.

to enacting a paradigm shift in economics inspired by Franciscan philosophies (Rozzoni and Limata 2024).[24]

All these initiatives testify to Francis's enduring iconic relevance achieved through constant re-narrations—particularly in ecological discourse—as a transnational and transcultural process. My study examines such re-narrations in recent British and Irish poems addressing the issue of human–nonhuman relationality as a way of enhancing possible responses to the challenges prompted by the Anthropocene, alongside wider discussions on literature's influence on culture regarding these topics (Zapf 2016).

4. Francis and Birds in 1960s Irish and British Poetry: Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, and Michael Longley

Assisi, written in 1964 and first published in 1966 in the collection *Surroundings*, is a popular poem written by Scottish author Norman MacCaig (1910-1996). The lyric develops along three stanzas depicting a street person with physical disabilities (referred to as a 'dwarf') sitting outside Saint Francis Basilica in the eponymous Umbrian town and interacting with a group of tourists.

MacCaig's poetic works can often be considered as 'attempts to approach the world outside, to find a relation with the Other as different from the Self in order to reconcile observer and observed and, also, reverse their respective roles' (Fazzini 2019: 14). Fazzini's remark fits the subject of the poem where the dwarf, seen as an *outcast* of society, plays the *central* role. Yet, descriptions of the dwarf's relationship with tourists and vice versa, are interspersed with references to Francis's preaching to the birds, which invites readers to a broad understanding of his relational ethics to both humans and nonhumans. Before proceeding further, it is worth noting that, in the context of an ecocritical re-reading of this poem, the theme of tourism is particularly effective for reflecting on human–nonhuman relationality in the Anthropocene. This is especially relevant considering the negative impact of mass tourism development on the environment over the past few decades. This growing scholarly field,[25] though only briefly mentioned in this

[24] For a further discussion on *The Economy of Francesco*, visit the website indicated in the bibliography.

[25] For a further discussion on the link between tourism and the Anthropocene, see Gren and Huijbens (2019).

study, contributes to the negative depiction of tourists in the poem when adopting an ecocritical lens, as will be illustrated in the following lines.

Both Francis and the Franciscan episode are mentioned in the very opening of the poem, where the saint is epitomised as 'brother of the poor' and 'talker with birds' (line 6): 'outside the three tiers of churches built / in honour of St Francis, brother / of the poor, talker with birds' (MacCaig 1964; 1966 [2011]: 309). This wording establishes from the start a sense of connectedness between human beings ('the poor', referring to the poem's dwarf protagonist) and animals ('the birds'), which runs through the poem, informing readers about the peculiarities of Franciscan spirituality within the broader context of Christian beliefs, through an all-embracing celebration of God's creation.

The second stanza provides one more example of this connection by depicting a priest illustrating Giotto's frescoes to some tourists and emphasising their power to convey God's word to the Middle Ages' illiterate viewers.[26] In actual fact, the frescoes of Giotto's cycle in the Upper Basilica in Assisi provide narratives of the lives of Saint Francis and Jesus through some particularly relevant episodes, which seem to be recalled in these lines.[27]At the same time, the poem also points to the narrow mindedness of contemporary visitors, who, like their predecessors in the past, find it hard to grasp the sense of the images, owing to a different kind of illiteracy:

> A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,
> fluttered after him as he scattered
> the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed
> the ruined temple outside, whose eyes
> wept pus, whose back was higher
> than his head, whose lopsided mouth
> said Grazie in a voice as sweet
> as a child's when she speaks to her mother
> or a bird's when it spoke
> to St Francis.
>
> (Norman MacCaig, 'Assisi', in *Surroundings,* 1964; 1966 [2011]: 309)

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[26] Cf. 'A priest explained / how clever it was of Giotto / to make his frescoes tell stories / that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness / of God and the suffering / of His Son' (MacCaig 1966 [2011]:309)

[27] This pertains to the Saint Francis cycle in the Upper Church. For further discussion on the possible interpretations of the cycle of the life of Francis and that of Jesus, positioned one below the other, see Moleta (1983).

The tourists' inability to perceive the frescoes as images of God ('the goodness / of God and the suffering / of His Son,') is not due to their lack of education but to their unresponsiveness to the priest's elucidation. Such stolidity is described through negative bird metaphors that reverse the connotations in the Franciscan episode. Whereas the birds, in the original tale, listened and enthusiastically responded to Francis' sermon, the tourists look like a noisy, shapeless, and inattentive flock who 'disperse, dissipate'[28] the valuable insights conveyed by Giotto's art: verbs like 'clucking' and 'fluttered' highlight the human–nonhuman parallel while underscoring the negative vision of confused and chaotic tourists offered by the poem. The same applies to the following lines, where the tourists' indifference to the Word of God is seen to couple with their indifference to His teaching: in fact, as the poem illustrates, they seem unable to recognise God in the 'dwarf'–an outcast of society and expression of vulnerability and sufferance, who, in the Christian tradition, especially according to Franciscan spirituality,[29] represents a manifestation of the Divine–by simply passing by and ignoring him ('It was they who had passed / the ruined temple outside'). The metaphor of the dwarf as a 'temple', beyond portraying him and his suffering ('ruined') body as a material manifestation of God, also allows for a contrast with the actual temple/church in Assisi, where the poem is set. The Basilica, in this context, appears primarily as a container of art rather than of the Divine, thus functioning more as a tourist attraction than a place of contemplation, with even priests acting as tourist guides rather than spiritual guides. On the one hand, the metaphor reflects a crucial aspect of Franciscan spirituality in the affection and care for human sufferance and vulnerability (Francis' conversion is also often associated with his first embrace of a physically ill person–a leper outside his family's fabric shop, Sulmasy 2006: 95); on the other hand, it builds on the Christian metaphor of the 'body as a temple'(Robinson 1977) and on the idea that God can be found in material relationships with others. The theme of relationality therefore re-emerges as a key topic in the metaphor, highlighting the importance of embodied and embedded expressions of God in the Franciscan ethos, which however extends beyond a mere anthropocentric view.

Two highly sentimental similes in the closing lines illustrate this effect, while further enhancing, by contrast, the negative portrayal of the tourists: the dwarf's

[28] See the definition of 'scatter' according to the OED (2024).

[29] For further discussion on Franciscan spirituality in relation to poverty and the outcast, see Wolf (2005).

gentle acknowledgement of the negligent tourists ('Grazie', or 'thank you' in English) is compared with the affective bonds between a child and her mother and, in turn, between the birds and Francis in the preaching episode.

The use of the Italian language for the dwarf's expression of acknowledgment, within the context of an English-language poem, evokes the challenge of direct comprehension without prior knowledge or a mediator. This mirrors the difficulty that tourists face in interpreting Giotto's frescoes. Additionally, this lexical choice emphasises the term's semantic and etymological Latinate origin from '*gratia*', which is associated with various expressions of ethical values in Franciscanism, such as pleasantness, favour, esteem, and indulgence (Simpson 2000: 267). This emphasis on thankfulness is particularly relevant in exploring traces of Franciscan ethics expressed in the poem, as it echoes the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, where the phrase '*Laudato Si'*' (praised be) is a central expression of Saint Francis's relationship with God through appreciation of all creation, both human and nonhuman.[30] In this regard, this expression–'Grazie'–allows us to see the dwarf almost as an embodiment of Francis himself, making the specific qualities of his voice particularly informative on issues of relationality.

Sweetness is the main feature in these thankful relationships between the dwarf and the tourists ('said Grazie in a voice as *sweet* / as […]'), a metaphor of a Franciscan ethos applied to relationships among humans (mother–child) which, however, the readers are invited to take as models of human–nonhuman relational dynamics as well (Francis–birds). Hence, transcending mere allegorical reading, and acknowledging the specificities of connection among Francis and the birds offered in the poem, *Assisi* suggests possible forms of trans-species ethical relationality that gains particularly relevance in light of current ecocritical debates: growing attention to affective attachment with nonhumans is emerging as a powerful means to reframe human and nonhuman subjectivity through both ontological and material connections (Bladow – Ladino 2018). The poem illustrates this effect through its linguistic and metaphorical devices that blend human and nonhuman subjects.

Emphasis on the connectedness between humans and nonhumans along practices of ethical relationality is again the distinctive feature of a highly popular Irish poem–*Saint Francis and the Birds* (1966)–by Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. The lyrical text,

[30] Which includes fire, stars, sun, wind, and air among other elements described in terms of cosmic brotherhood and sisterhood. See Moloney (2013).

featured in the collection *Death of a Naturalist*–where environmental imagery is a distinctive feature[31]–offers a compact outline of the Franciscan eponymous episode, focusing primarily on the reaction of the birds to the saint's address:

> When Francis preached love to the birds
> They listened, fluttered, throttled up
> Into the blue like a flock of words
>
> Released for fun from his holy lips.
> Then wheeled back, whirred about his head,
> Pirouetted on brothers' capes.
>
> Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played
> And sang, like images took flight.
> Which was the best poem Francis made,
>
> His argument true, his tone light.
>
> (Seamus Heaney, 'Saint Francis and the Birds', in *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966, 46)

Heaney's poem depicts the high emotional level of the birds' response to Francis' preaching; their excitement is conveyed in the first stanza by such verbs of movement as 'fluttered' and 'throttled up'. Unlike what happens in MacCaig's poem, where 'flutter' refers to the flock of inattentive tourists, here the verb remains neutrally descriptive as it depicts the enthusiastic movement of the birds 'up and down or to and fro in quick irregular motions' (OED 2024).

The positive interaction between Francis, his fellow friars, and the birds–a symbol for the broader human–nonhuman relationship–is also highlighted by descriptions of the birds' physical and emotional reactions to the saint's words. The lines 'Then wheeled back, whirred about his head, / Pirouetted on brothers' capes' emphasise the importance of the animals in the 'preaching to the birds' episode by showcasing their emotional responses. This perspective offers an alternative to the traditional anthropocentric view. In this new interpretation, the animals are not merely passive recipients of Francis's words but are instead portrayed as active, responsive beings and central poetic subjects in the poem's narrative.

In this description, the interaction between humans (friars) and nonhumans (birds) is highlighted through prepositions like 'back', 'about', and 'on', which clarify the birds' movements *in relation to* other beings. The lexical choices in

[31] On environmental images in Heaney's poems and collections, see Padilla (2009) and Lindström (2015).

this passage also emphasise the joy and excitement of this relationship on both a semantic and phonological level. Phrases like 'wheeled back' and 'whirred about' convey the excitement the birds experience during Francis's preaching, while the assonance enhances the emotional tone and musicality of the poem, also evident in its partially regular rhyme scheme (ABA CBC DBE). This emotional charge is further reinforced by the focus on the semantic field of dance, with words like 'pirouetted' and 'danced' amplifying the scene's excitement. These features collectively lead readers to perceive Francis's preaching as more than merely 'deliver[ing] a sermon or religious address' (OED 2024): it becomes an embodied and embedded expression of affective relationality between humans and nonhumans.

The notion of relationality emerges again in the passage through linguistic enmeshment that connects the animal and human domains, particularly through two similes in the first and third stanzas: 'like a flock of words' and 'like images took flight'. These similes link the flight of birds with the words spoken by Francis and with images, inviting readers to consider the complex meanings associated with birds and their relationship with Francis. Specifically, just as Francis's words in the popular 'preaching to the birds' are meant to glorify God, birds become instruments of praise through their essence and excitement, recalling the Franciscan notion of *perfetta letizia* ('perfect joy') as an expression of closeness to Christ, albeit reinterpreted.[32] Similarly, as images, they become symbols of divine manifestations. In this sense, birds can be seen as bearers of affective capacities, which, in light of contemporary debates on human–animal ethics (Panksepp 2004; Davidson – Goldsmith – Scherer 2009), becomes crucial for developing an awareness of the ontological and material connections between living beings. This perspective challenges traditional anthropocentric and speciesist views, highlighting the importance of understanding these connections in a more inclusive and empathetic way.

Eventually, the polysemy of the term 'tone' sheds further light on the complexity of the metaphorical value of Francis's preaching in the poem. According to the OED, in a more abstract sense, 'tone' identifies 'a particular style in discourse or writing, which expresses the person's sentiment or reveals his or her character'

[32] The notion of *perfetta letizia* is rooted in a passage from the Franciscan sources, where Francis explains that enduring suffering, rejection, insults, and harshness from others is an expression of perfect joy, akin to Christ's suffering on the cross. This highlights Francis' deep connection to and identification with Christ's experiences. For a more detailed discussion on the concept, see Cantalamessa and Martini (2003).

(OED 2024). This definition helps us interpret Francis's experience with the birds as primarily affective, suggesting that, as already discussed in reference to MacCaig's poem, the Franciscan ethos enables possibilities of human–nonhuman relationality through dynamics of 'affective attunement'. This means reattaching to nonhuman domains beyond dominant dualistic anthropocentric axioms, acknowledging a deeper emotional unity between them. This notion is surprisingly widely advocated by ecocritics to reassess the awareness of 'not liv[ing] apart from the world' (Bate 2000: 23),[33] reminding of the possibilities to acknowledge the sense of continuity (ontological and material) between humans and nonhumans. In times of crisis, such as the one we live in, this aspect highlights the importance of alternative bonds with the nonhuman world. *Assisi* exemplifies this by enhancing the depiction of the human–nonhuman Franciscan relational method, offering an alternative to dominant dualistic constraints. A similar reflection is offered by another Irish[34] poem from the 1960s, *Saint Francis to the Birds*[35] by Michael Longley (1939-present): it establishes an overt genealogical connection with Heaney's lyric as shown in the subtitle, which reads '(With Apologies to S. Heaney Esq.)', thus inviting readers to compare the two works.

Longley's five-quatrain poem, written in a regular rhyme and metric pattern, voices the (imaginary) words of St. Francis's sermon to the birds. The first-person narrator can in fact be taken as *il Poverello* himself–as also suggested by the poem's title–inviting the animals to praise God. The incipit '*And, summing up*, I think of when / With cloud and cloudburst you confer' (Longley 1966 c. [2019]: 229, emphasis added) posits the poem as the conclusion of a longer speech, thus echoing the themes and topics that have developed in time around the Franciscan story.

The first section (stanzas 1-3) focuses on making the birds aware of their qualities as part of God's creation while reminding readers of the peculiarity of Franciscan spirituality in assessing an appreciation of creation where (also) animals are central.[36] Stanzas 4-5 highlight the birds as correlatives of God and as

[33] According to Jonathan Bate, literature allows for 'thoughtfulness and attentiveness, and attunement to both words and the world' considering its capacity 'to acknowledge that, although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not live apart from the world' (Bate 2000: 23).

[34] It is worth noting that Longley also identifies as Anglo-Irish, recognising this heritage as an influence on the ethos of his poetry, as Brearton (2006: 17) illustrates.

[35] The poem is published in Wenzell (2019: 229-230).

[36] This is evident, for instance, in lines such as, 'By God's sheer genius lifted there' (stanza 1, line 3), 'It is perfection you rehearse –' (stanza 2, line 5), and 'Creating one more precedent,

the ultimate representatives of His creation.[37]It is worth reminding here that the central position of birds in the poem subverts anthropocentric (and speciesist) hierarchies ingrained in traditional approaches to the nonhuman (also in the Christian tradition), which usually hold a subordinate position.[38]

The description of birds in stanza 5 makes this subversion explicit:

> Quick emblems of his long estate,
> It's good to have you overhead
> Who understand when all is said,
> When all is done, and it is late.
>
> (Michael Longley, "Saint Francis to the Birds", 1966 c. [2019]: 229)

By underscoring the exceptional status of birds in God's creation, the attributive phrase 'emblems of his long estate' subverts the hierarchy revealed by the *Scala Naturae* (The Great Chain of Being) in traditional (Western) interpretations of human and nonhuman subjectivity, where human beings hold primacy (Ferrando 2019: 94). An emblem, in fact, is 'a figured object used with symbolic meaning, as the distinctive badge of a person, family, nation' (OED 2024); hence, birds depicted as possessing these features invite readers to consider the Franciscan ethos as a symbol of human exceptionalism traditionally associated with God's creation.[39] Similarly, the adverb 'overhead' referring to birds seems to invite human beings to re-consider traditional ontological hierarchies in the understanding of living (and non-living) entities. So does the poem's focus on the birds' ubiquitous comprehension of God's direct manifestations in space and time: ('Who *understand* when *all* is said, / When *all* is done, and it is late'; emphasis added).

/ With no less forethought, no less care / He gave you feathers and the air / To migrate to his best intent' (stanza 3, lines 9-12).

37 In this sense, one can consider, for instance, stanza 4 (line 16), which reads, 'Birds, you are always on his mind,' or this line in stanza 5: 'Quick emblems of his long estate' (line 17).

38 For a detailed discussion on the influence of the *Scala Naturae* (Great Chain of Beings) on the establishment of anthropocentric and dualistic assumptions in understanding human and nonhuman subjectivity, see Ferrando (2019: 94).

39 A discussion on human exceptionalism from a traditional Christian perspective has been offered, among others, by Stefan Sorgner, who illustrates how "From Plato until Kant, philosophers claimed that reason is the divine spark in us, and us possessing reason separates us in a categorically ontological manner from the solely material world. This paradigm has been taken for granted by most of the best-known philosophers in Western cultural history" (Sorgner 2022; 44).

The conclusion (stanza 6) further emphasises the birds' extraordinary divine qualities:

> May my sermon, like your customs,
> Reach suddenly beyond dispute –
> Oh, birds entire and absolute,
> Last birds above our broken homes.
> (Michael Longley, "Saint Francis to the Birds", 1966 c. [2019: 230])

The adjective 'absolute' referring to birds is further proof of the reconfiguration of human anthropocentric absolutism. Besides, the birds' wholeness ('entire'), an attribute of God's creation, stands out against the fragmentation of human beings highlighted by the metaphor of 'broken homes'.

When read from an ecocritical perspective, the poem therefore illustrates how Franciscan ethos allows for a special kind of relationality, suggesting a critical re-examination of traditional assumptions in conceiving human and nonhuman beings, as well as alternative figurations and connected relational ethics. The idea that the Anthropocene is a direct effect of anthropocentric, dualistic assumptions–as explained by scholars from different research fields (Braidotti 2019; Ferrando 2019)–finds a worthy correlative in this poem, where readers are invited to negotiate their core dualistic cultural legacy in culture, in favour of a more pluralistic view of the environment.

5. Francis and the Birds in 1990s and 2010s Irish and British poetry: Paula Meehan and Ann Wroe

In the past few decades, enduring references to Francis of Assisi in Irish and British poetry, particularly regarding the episode of his preaching to the birds, can be found in the works of two female poetic voices who, in different times and ways, offer original interplays between (ever-)new cultural issues and Franciscan spirituality. This section will address Paula Meehan's *My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis* (1994) and Ann Wroe's *Francis: A Life in Songs* (2018).

Irish poet Paula Meehan (1955-present) offers a biographical sketch of her father in a narrative poem made of three stanzas of 9 to 15 lines in free verse, with the third one specifically focusing on the image of Francis and the birds. The first two stanzas provide the context of the poem's setting: after waking up in the family house and observing the indoor surroundings (stanza 1), the lyrical subject notices that her father has entered the rear garden; as she glances (stanza 2), the man metamorphoses into the saint, surrounded by diverse kinds of birds:

They came then: birds
of every size, shape, colour; they came
from the hedges and shrubs,
from eaves and garden sheds,
from the industrial estate, outlying fields,
from Dubber Cross they came
and the ditches of the North Road.

(Paula Meehan, "My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis", in *Pillow Talk*, 1994, 11-12)

Here, 'multiplicity' is the main theme in at least two ways: first, the list of nouns in the second line stresses the diversity of the birds populating the scene: 'size, shape, colour'; second, the anaphora–see the repetition of 'from' in lines 3-6–further details the animals' different provenance in terms of rural and urban locations ('from the industrial estate, outlying fields') but also specific sites ('Dubber Cross' and 'the North Road').

Moreover, the invitation to consider the connectedness between humans and nonhumans in the poem comes through the stress on the *physical, material* encounters among the father and the birds, rather than through sole *abstract* references to Franciscan philosophy. First, as suggested by the toponymy in the poem ('Dubber Cross'; 'North Road'), Francis appears in specific existing places, manifesting in the present-day world and engaging with it. Second, the poem suggests that, just as the father does, one can *become* Francis in one's daily actions and experiences. This material manifestation of a spiritual dimension acquires relevance in the context of Franciscan discourse, especially when viewed through the notion of 'affective piety'. This concept emphasises an emotional devotion that emerged during the Middle Ages, focused on the humanity of Christ and encouraging believers to visualise and concentrate on episodes from the scriptures to engage with their physicality.[40] This effect, also referred to in Latin as '*compassio*', finds a popular example in Francis of Assisi (and later Franciscan traditions), who often stressed the physical manifestation of God and his suffering in his spirituality. In the poem, this effect returns, but making Francis the very object of a physical and emotional engagement for the lyrical subjects. The key role of the animals in evoking and materialising the popular 'preaching to the birds' episode reinforces the importance of nonhumans in this transfiguration. This effect reassesses human–nonhuman relationality as a key topic in the poem's evoking of the Franciscan ethos. In ecological terms, this reading acquires

[40] For a further discussion on the notion of 'affective piety' in Franciscanism, see Davis (2016).

particular significance for its resonance with the current widely discussed necessity to consider human–nonhuman connectedness not only ontologically but also materially, an embodied and embedded sense of posthuman subjectivity that, as the poem suggests, Francis endorses.

Emphasis on Francis' transformative power comes back in the following lines, illustrating his capacity to influence the way one engages with the environment, interspersed with biblical and literary references:

> The garden was a pandemonium
> when my father threw up his hands
> and tossed the crumbs to the air. The sun
> cleared O'Reilly's chimney
> and he was suddenly radiant,
> a perfect vision of St Francis,
> made whole, made young again,
> in a Finglas garden.
>
> (Paula Meehan, "My Father Perceived as a Vision of St. Francis", in *Pillow Talk*, 1994, 12)

In apparent contrast with the Edenic scenario depicted in the previous lines, where various species of birds harmoniously coexisted with the human (Father/Francis) in a garden, the phrase 'the garden was a pandemonium' recalls the location but with different implications: 'Pandemonium', in fact, retains a primary negative significant in light of its poetic genealogy starting with the imaginary 'capital' of hell, the palace where the council of demons is held, as in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), where the term was first introduced.[41] The same is valid for a more generic meaning of the term 'pandemonium', which reminds of 'utter confusion, uproar; wild and noisy disorder; a tumult; chaos' (OED 2024). The reversal of these negative implications is evident in the joyful and affective human–nonhuman engagement described in the poem. The multitude of animals symbolises a moment of deep connection and enjoyment. This is portrayed through actions of caring (feeding the birds: 'threw up his hands and tossed the crumbs to the air') and the absence of fear (both the birds approaching Francis and Francis being surrounded by a storm of birds). Thus, while the poem retains the biblical reference to 'pandemonium' and its potential to evoke transcendental spiritual imagery, its common negative sense is transformed. The garden, with Francis's presence, becomes an actual manifestation of the Garden of Eden, turning apparent chaos into the harmonious coexistence of life forms.

41 As also illustrated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 2024).

A similar understanding is favoured by another possible intertextual reference evoked by the notion of pandemonium, relating to William Blake's poem *And did those feet in ancient time*, written in 1804, featuring the preface to his epic poem *Milton*. In this lyric, England's green pastures are depicted as the location where a celestial Jerusalem can be created despite the growing impact of the industrial revolution on the natural landscape of the country at that time: this is referred to with the popular metaphor of 'dark Satanic mills' (Blake 1804 [1907]: xix), resonating with the imagery of devil and hell evoked by the notion of 'pandemonium'. Similarly, in Meehan's poem, a contrast is drawn between the rear garden where Francis's transfiguration occurs–with its depiction of verdant ecosystem and biodiversity–and the surrounding industrial setting. However, unlike Blake, Meehan's text depicts this scenario as already undergoing a transformation, as evidenced by the subversion of the traditional negative symbolism of the industrial context. The image of the chimney is 'cleared' by the sun shining on the scene, another well-established symbol of (Francis') divinity. The contrast with the blackness caused by industrial (air) pollution therefore becomes a surprising environmental narrative in the poem, where readers are invited to acknowledge, once again, the potential transformative power of Franciscan ethics, also in light of more evident, material, and 'modern' effects of industrialisation. This is a poem which seems to perform lyrically what is being actually illustrated in economic discourse on the possible implications of Franciscan philosophy for enacting a paradigm shift in dominant economic models through ethical alternatives.[42]

The concluding lines of the poem reassess this idea by illustrating another effect of transformative power of the Franciscan ethos, this time referred to one's self. Seen through a Franciscan lens, in fact, the father becomes 'suddenly radiant' (where the symbolism of light newly empowers the divine nature of the transformative Franciscan ethics) and 'young again'. This change reverses the father's existential condition, bringing about a kind of rebirth and renewal, which bears upon the whole of his life ('whole'), thus proving that Francis is capable of influencing one's life(style).

Ann Wroe's recently published collection, titled *Francis: A Life in Songs* (2018), is based on similar assumptions. Unlike the other authors cited in this essay, Wroe

[42] Rosi Braidotti, for instance, has extensively discussed how paradigmatic change in relational ethics among humans–nonhumans also has the potential for assuming economic and productive changes, even at the industrial level, as the poem also seems to indicate (2019).

is not primarily acknowledged as a poet[43] even though she has garnered critical attention. One of her recent poetic compositions, titled *Francis: A Life in Songs,* deserves our attention here since, once again, it focuses on Francis preaching to the birds in the context of (contemporary) British poetry hand-in-hand with discussions on human–nonhuman relational ethics.

The collection explores the life of *il Poverello* in different sections, each combining quotations from Franciscan sources, including words attributed to Francis himself, with some original poetic compositions. These poems are of two types: a) poetic renderings of selected episodes from the life of the saint, offering 'an evocation of Francis at this point or this time'; and b) 'reflection[s] of this aspect of him in the modern world' (Wroe 2018: 9). Specifically, my reading focuses on a section titled *Bird-souls*, which blends references to two episodes from Francis' hagiography involving volatiles. They are both drawn from Bonaventure's already discussed 'preaching to the birds' and from Celano's account of a fisherman giving Francis a bird, which did not want to fly away from his hands.[44]

The short, free stanza poem begins with a paratextual caption locating the composition: '*Council garden, North London*' (Wroe 2018: 162; emphasis in original). As already discussed in relation to Meehan's work, this mention suggests a link between Francis' ethos and the *actual* present-day world with its interpretative patterns, thus encouraging a new understanding of the traditional episode vis-a-vis contemporary reality. The opening of the poem offers a variation on the preaching to the birds episode, adding a reference to some sick animals and to the lyrical subject's wondering how humans could respond to their needs and suffering:

> The sick dove by the hedge
> the thrush beside the fence
> quiveringly challenge
> our indifference–
>
> We want to save them,
> but are uncertain how–
> long to lift them gently
> to the here and now
>
> (Ann Wroe, "Bird-souls", in *Francis: A Life in Songs*, 2018, 162)

[43] As Kellaway observes: 'Not known as a poet (she is obituaries editor on the Economist), Wroe has launched into rhyme as if (as must be the case) she has always been at home in verse' (2018).

[44] As indicated by Wroe, it refers to Celano's *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, 2 CXXVI.

Despite the evidence of the birds' need for care, as their condition of physical distress ('quiveringly') demonstrates, the 'hedges' and 'fences' (first stanza) that separate them from humans make it almost impossible for the human subjects in the poem to even notice their need. They, in fact, remain 'indifferent' (like MacCaig's tourists facing the dwarf in *Assisi*) to the birds, an attitude clearly revealing an opposition to the Franciscan spirituality, which, as seen, makes compassion and attention to the weakest and most vulnerable a cornerstone. The line 'We want to save them, / but are uncertain how', beyond illustrating the incapability of humans to respond to the birds' necessities, also figures as an admission taking up a symbolic meaning if regarded in ontological terms: the stress on humans' limited relational capacities becomes a reference to the influence of rooted assumptions in the figuration of the nonhuman domains along anthropocentric and speciesist axioms which, on a dualistic logic, are built on absolute (ontological) *separation* between humans and nonhumans.

Far from being unalterable, this condition, however, seems negotiable, especially in light of Franciscan relational ethics, to which the poem generally refers:

> yet passing later
> we part-understand:
> shunning the clumsiness
> of human hand,
> they've stretched their necks,
> spread out their wings;
> not dying, flying
> past the end of things.
>
> (Ann Wroe, "Bird-souls", in *Francis: A Life in Songs*, 2018, 162)

The image of returning to the place where the birds in distress are found ('yet passing later'), in the practice of 'retracing one's steps', suggests a rise of awareness in the lyrical I, as the possibility to reconsider exclusivist assumptions in one's relationship with nonhuman others is contemplated. On the other hand, what the birds seem to teach humans as they shun the 'clumsiness of human hand' is precisely the inefficiency of the human approach–in other words, of the anthropocentric perspective. As the poem therefore suggests, inadequate human(istic) domains can be re-read when employing a Franciscan ethos.

The line 'not dying, flying' further clarifies this possibility: referring to the birds, after the human subjects in the poem ('we') have offered their help to the animals, these verbs suggest the efficacy of actions devoted to supporting forms of

otherness in difficulty, allowing them an escape from their destiny of succumbing (as the negative 'not' in front of the verb 'dying' illustrates). The verb 'flying', instead, illustrates the success resulting from a positive relationality between humans and nonhumans, which the Franciscan ethic ensures. The relevance of this passage is also testified by the alliteration ('not dying, flying'), which strengthens the narrator's emphasis on the benefit in following Saint Francis' footsteps, enacting a similar sense of care and attentiveness. This effect, which allows for trespassing the metaphysical boundaries ('past the end of things') that exist in the traditional evaluation of (human)life subjectivity (Braidotti 2019), recalls the invitation of the poem to rethink established limits (and the ontological sense of separateness) illustrated at the beginning of the poem.

The final stanza expounds on the picturesque image of a swan at sunset near the coast, which prompts the narrator to reflect on its multiple interpretations:

> Sunset:
> the wave
> bends down its head
> a ghost-swan
> or angel
> spilling
> Feathers
> Below the cliffs
>
> (Ann Wroe, "Bird-souls", in *Francis: A Life in Songs*, 2018, 164)

The swan's metamorphosis into an angel and/or a ghost still refers to the episode of preaching to the birds by pointing to the volatile's closeness to God: the dense imagery voices the multi-layered open significance of birds. While the swan's spectral dimension ('ghost-swan') conveys ephemerality, the alternative reference to an angel ('or angel') signals the futility of clear-cut categorisations when determining one's identity, while blurring the boundaries between entities. The plurality of meanings thus adds to the relevance of relationality and connectedness in the poem, both on a linguistic and formal level.

The image of the 'sunset' in the closing stanza, with its liminal encounter between day and night, stands as the ultimate example of such coexistence of opposite images. Thus, in contrast with the beginning of the poem, where divisions and boundaries are central, the conclusion establishes re-connectedness and relationality. A link between humans and nonhumans along the dynamics of Franciscan relational ethics presented in the poem is thus newly established.

Just like Franciscan ethics can change rooted assumptions, in the context of today's environmental crises, *bird-souls* prompt to revise the anthropocentric assumptions which have led to the Anthropocene. Readers are shown the possibility of ways out of current crises by reassessing new forms of relationality that Franciscanism demonstrates as adaptable to both past and present contexts.

6. Conclusions

The reception of Francis of Assisi in Irish and British poetry from the 1960s to the 2010s illuminates both the integration of this figure within the cultural context under examination and his adaptability to evolving cultural concerns. As I hope to have shown, the account of the preaching to the birds aligns with the emerging environmental discourse of the 1960s through complex illustrations of human–nonhuman relationality resonating with contemporary discussions in the fields of ecocriticism and environmental humanities in general.

Through an ecocritical lens, human–nonhuman relationality appears as a central facet of Francis' ethic in the poems under examination: even when the imagery of preaching to the birds is expressed through more indirect references, there always emerges the possibility of seeing Francis as a motivating form of trans-species engagement, alternative to more traditional dualistic relational models. Like Francis, readers can also reconfigure the dynamics of subjugation of alterities accordingly, both towards humans and nonhumans (MacCaig). The possibility to rely on forms of affective attunement between human beings and the environment is another trait suggested by the poetic rendering of Franciscan spirituality: the idea of a continuum between human beings and the environment is conveyed by a number of different images and stylistic devices, including linguistic effects illustrating forms of enmeshment between the animal and human domains (Heaney). On the other hand, this is what happens in the language of Francis's popular sermon: the way animals are described in this fictional account (Longley)–for instance, the emphasis on their exceptionalism–holds symbolic value, inviting readers to negotiate anthropocentric (and speciesist) conceptual hierarchies, which usually position nonhumans as subordinate to humans.

In recent years, Francis has also re-emerged in Irish poetry as a 'vision' capable of enabling transformative effects on the way one perceives and evaluates the environment and its entities. Traditional negative connotations rooted in dualistic cultural figurations of nonhuman domains might shift to more positive ones

(Meehan). Similarly, the potential of the Franciscan ethos to revise the alleged absolute sense of separation between humans and nonhumans features in Wroe's 2018 British poem, where the liminality of these two domains is highlighted with a view to re-evaluating their continuity and prompting a new sense of relationality. Therefore, given the current need to reframe and transform dominant assumptions concerning both human and nonhuman subjectivities underpinning the Anthropocene, these observations become particularly relevant to establish a dialogue between the analysed poems and present-day ecological urges.

From an ecocritical perspective, Francis of Assisi in 1960s-2010s Irish and British poetry also displays a degree of environmental maturity that prevents him from being reduced to superficial clichés–'the saint who speaks with animals' or 'the patron saint of ecologists'–as downsides of his status as a prominent, increasingly secularised icon. In fact, just as a poem represents an ultra-complex textual structure (Nünning – Nünning 2014: 63), so Francis as a poetic subject is imbued with a thought-provoking complexity that invites debate on his understanding of the interaction between humans and nonhumans. The religious *conversion* that Francis experienced–from a dissolute life to an existence dedicated to outcasts and expressing an encompassing sense of belonging with the creation–becomes, today, a powerful metaphor of an *ecological conversion* in understanding human-nonhuman relationships, challenging and rethinking anthropocentrism.

Beyond the icon, therefore, Francis can be seen as a *tool* for rethinking 'the human', exceeding traditional assumptions with the aim of establishing more ethical, pluralistic configurations, where humans and nonhumans bond materially, ontologically, and affectively. As challenging as this task may appear, Francis seems to have an additional advantage to facing it: his uninterrupted rich afterlife in literature and culture over the past 800 years–a trend expected to continue–reveals a momentum that allows for conceiving *il Poverello* as a figure informing possible, alternative ethical future scenarios within the context of human-nonhuman relationality. It is a *sustainable* logic particularly timely–and needed–in light of current environmental crises.

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Ecos de la tradición en "Epitafio" de Fernando Aramburu

The Echoes of Tradition in Fernando Aramburu's "Epitafio"

> "El poeta que tiene personalidad no necesita volver nunca a nada. La tradición debe estar asimilada como abono de raíz, pero el ala no debe ser antigua."
>
> Juan Ramón Jiménez, *Política poética*

> "Porque el muerto está en pie"
>
> Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, *Rima XLVI*

Resumen

Fernando Aramburu (San Sebastián, 1959) es un célebre y poliédrico escritor conocido por su prosa, ensayos, cuentos infantiles, artículos de opinión y colaboraciones en periódicos. A pesar de ello, cuenta con una trayectoria poética emprendida durante los primeros años de su producción que brinda al lector una experiencia lírica de gran valor estético. Este artículo tiene como objetivo esclarecer los ecos de la tradición en el poema "Epitafio" del poemario *Bocas del litoral* (1993-2005). Para ello, se tendrán en cuenta cuanto postulado por los estudiosos de la intertextualidad. Asimismo, se hará un recorrido por la historia del famoso verso sobre el olvido, tomando como punto de partida Garcilaso de la Vega.

Palabras clave: intertextualidad, Fernando Aramburu, Luis Cernuda, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, olvido, tumba, Garcilaso de la Vega

Abstract

Fernando Arambaru (San Sebastian, 1959) is a famous and multifaceted writer known for his prose, essays, children's stories, opinion pieces and articles in newspapers. In addition to this, he is also an accomplished poet, and the work produced during the early years of his poetical career offers the reader a lyrical experience of great aesthetic value. The aim of this article is to elucidate the echoes of tradition present in the poem "Epitafio" from the collection of poems *Bocas del litoral* (1993-2005), while also taking into account theories of intertextuality. Furthermore, this article explores the history of the famous verse centred around the theme of the oblivion starting from the work of Garcilaso de la Vega.

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Keywords: intertextuality, Fernando Aramburu, Luis Cernuda, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, oblivion, grave, Garcilaso de la Vega

1. Intertextualidad

El punto neurálgico del análisis de las reminiscencias del pasado que migran a otros textos se asienta en el concepto de intertextualidad, un concepto esencial en el estudio de la literatura que alude a las relaciones que se emplazan entre diferentes textos, ya sea de manera explícita a través de citas o con la mera evocación de un texto dentro de otro. Esta es entendida "no solo como relación directa de la obra con sus fuentes, sino también como resonancia de la tradición literaria, como presencia implícita de las voces canonizadas procedentes del pasado, que a veces hablan a pesar de la voluntad del autor" (Bianchi 2020: 35).

El término intertextualidad es acuñado por Julia Kristeva en la revista *Critique* (Kristeva 1967: 438-467), fundamentado en las teorías sobre las relaciones dialógicas o dialogismo de Mijaíl Bajtín (Montanaro Meza 1988: 13). El dialogismo, que sirve de pórtico para las teorías postreras, es concebido como:

> Un elemento inherente al lenguaje. Afecta no sólo a la comunicación que se establece entre el sujeto de la escritura y el destinatario, sino también al diálogo que es inherente a la escritura misma, pues todo texto es intertextual, todo texto dialoga con otros textos. Bajtín no utiliza el término intertextualidad, pero la noción es el germen del concepto bajtiniano de "dialogismo" que aparece en sus obras (González Álvarez 2003: 122).

Bajo la concepción de intertextualidad de Kristeva, "todo texto se construye como un mosaico de citas, todo texto es absorción y transformación de otro texto. En lugar de la noción de intersubjetividad se instala la *intertextualidad*" (Kristeva 1978: 190). Otro teórico que trata el tema de la intertextualidad es Roland Barthes. En su opinión, cualquier texto es un intertexto ya que en su interior atesora el bagaje cultural previo a su concepción (Barthes 1974: 6). En 1976, se publican una serie de artículos en la revista *Poétique* a raíz de la crisis de estas teorías por su carencia de concreción, inaugurando una evolución del concepto (González Álvarez 2003: 123). Uno de los teóricos, Gérard Genette, postula su tesis entorno a la denominación de transtextualidad o transcendencia textual del texto. La transtextualidad radica en todas las relaciones, implícitas o explícitas, que se aprecian entre los textos. Para el teórico, toda obra literaria evoca otra. Genette identifica cinco tipos de relaciones transtextuales:

1. La intertextualidad – que supone la presencia de un texto dentro de otro (por cita, plagio, alusión).
2. La paratextualidad – que se aboca al contorno del texto propiamente dicho, su periferia (títulos, subtítulos, prólogos, ilustraciones, epílogos). Es el sitio donde se produce el "contrato o pacto genérico".
3. La metatextualidad – que remite a la relación de comentario de un texto sobre otro.
4. La architextualidad – más abstracta, pone en relación un texto con las diversas clases a las que pertenece.
5. La hipertextualidad – el campo de interés específico de Genette, en el que ingresan relaciones de derivación textual por transformación o imitación (parodia, pastiche, travestimiento, imitación satírica) (Genette 1989: 10-13).

Asimismo, cabe señalar el concepto de Enciclopedia que Umberto Eco expone en *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Eco 1975: 202). Esta funcionaría como una red polidimensional en la que los textos se entremezclan y retroalimentan. Para el autor, el eje vertebrador del concepto de Enciclopedia estriba en la representación de una gran biblioteca que comprende todo lo producido por una cultura. En otras palabras, el patrimonio cultural completo donde es posible discernir todo el conocimiento adquirido. Así, los nuevos textos se elaboran combinando textos más antiguos, conceptos sedimentados en la cultura y presentes en la Enciclopedia. Ante un determinado estímulo, es el intérprete quien, a través de su propia Enciclopedia, atribuye significado. Eco abarca así la indefectible importancia del interprete inherente a los postulados de Sander C. Peirce, padre de la Pragmática. En palabras de Valentina Pisanty:

> El modelo inferencial introduce la figura del interprete en el corazón de las definiciones mismas del signo y de la semiosis: es el intérprete quien, ante un signo, activa determinadas rutas para atribuir significado que la Enciclopedia pone a su disposición, a veces creando nuevas conexiones entre nudos del espacio semántico global, a menudo recorriendo sendas ya andadas (Pisanty 2004: 335).[1]

Eco propone la idea de cultura como enciclopedia en la que se atesoran todas las interpretaciones posibles. En *Semiotica e semiologia del linguaggio* (1984) manifiesta "la vida de la cultura es vida de los textos erguidos por leyes intertextuales todo «ya dicho» actúa como regla-posible. El «ya dicho» constituye el tesoro de la enciclopedia"[2] (Eco 1984: 300).

Considerando que el presente artículo se yergue sobre las reminiscencias del pasado que migran a través del tiempo hasta nuestros días, cabe destacar el

[1] Traducción propia.
[2] Traducción propia.

fenómeno de la metáfora y su comprensión e identificación. Así, Eco alude de nuevo a la Enciclopedia como sedimento cultural:

> La eficacia de la metáfora depende del marco sociocultural de la enciclopedia de los sujetos interpretantes. Desde esta perspectiva, se producen metáforas solo sobre la base de un tejido cultural rico, es decir, de un universo del contenido ya organizado en redes de interpretantes que, semióticamente, se ocupan de la similitud y la disimilitud de las propiedades[3] (Eco 1984: 195).

Nuestros conocimientos almacenados en la Enciclopedia son el eje vertebrador que nos permite realizar conexiones intertextuales a la hora de interpretar un determinado texto. El entramado de conocimientos almacenados nos permite reconocer ecos del pasado en textos del presente.

Considerando estas bases teóricas, esbozaré los ecos de la tradición patentes en "Epitafio" de Fernando Aramburu.

2. "Epitafio" de Fernando Aramburu

Fernando Aramburu (San Sebastián, 1959), célebre escritor español ampliamente conocido por su prosa, cuenta con una serie de poemarios escritos en su mayoría a finales del siglo pasado. Se trata de una obra poética sucinta que, sin embargo, no deja de contener una estética y riqueza de calidad incuestionable. Dado el gran relieve y calado del escritor, no es de extrañar que recientemente se haya editado una nueva antología de su obra poética, *Sinfonía corporal* (2023), que actualiza la postrera *Yo quisiera llover* (2010) añadiendo poemas incluidos en *Bruma y conciencia* (1993) que no habían sido publicados en la edición de 2010. Otra novedad de la antología radica en la acertada confluencia en un mismo poemario de los anteriores *Bocas del litoral* (1986-1990) y *1993-2005*, que se unen en un mismo repertorio tomando por nombre *Bocas del litoral* (1986-2005). *Sinfonía corporal* es un paso más hacia el merecido reconocimiento del poeta que, aun habiendo querido "despoetizarse", no deja de impregnar su obra en prosa de un gran lirismo.

Aramburu evoluciona durante los devaneos de la creación en verso engarzando diferentes etapas: de la primerísima *poiesis*, con la consiguiente fuga a mundos a través de los cuales el sujeto lírico expresa su emoción, pasando por el intimismo de rasgos sensuales y eróticos donde prima el amor y el sufrimiento que le atañe, al realismo cercano a las corrientes de la poesía de la experiencia. Buen conocedor de la literatura española, su poesía está preñada de ecos intertextuales

[3] Traducción propia.

que se remontan a la tradición literaria española. Un ejemplo fehaciente es el poema "Epitafio", recogido en el poemario *Bocas del litoral*, perteneciente a su etapa realista, que no desdeña el intimismo plasmado a través de un sujeto lírico que transita experiencias y recuerdos que hallan cabida en la existencia universal del ser humano. El poema reza así:

¿Morir? No he muerto. Soy
estas piedras tiradas
sin dolor, sin conciencia,
acaso esa porción
de pájaro en la rama
o aquella hoja inmortal de hiedra
en tu olvido. (Aramburu 2023: 190)

Las resonancias intertextuales sobresalen a partir del título, siendo el epitafio la inscripción que remite a la tumba en sí misma. La imagen del sepulcro, así como las que se suceden a lo largo de los siete versos del poema, dan cuenta de migraciones del pasado. Se trata de una tumba en la que, no obstante, el sujeto lírico declara no yacer, por hallarse más bien en el olvido eterno.

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870) – "Rima LXVI"

¿De dónde vengo?… El más horrible y áspero
de los senderos busca.
Las huellas de unos pies ensangrentados
sobre la roca dura;

Los despojos de un alma hecha jirones
en las *zarzas* agudas,
te dirán el camino
que conduce a mi cuna.

¿Adónde voy? El más sombrío y triste
de los páramos cruza;
valle de eternas nieves y de eternas
melancólicas brumas.

En donde esté *una piedra solitaria*
sin inscripción alguna,
donde habite el olvido,
allí estará mi tumba. (Bécquer 2020: 153)

Luis Cernuda (1902-1963) – "Donde habite el olvido"

Donde habite el olvido,
En los vastos *jardines* sin aurora;
Donde yo sólo sea
Memoria de una *piedra sepultada entre ortigas*
Sobre la cual el viento escapa a sus insomnios.

Donde mi nombre deje
Al cuerpo que designa en brazos de los siglos,
Donde el deseo no exista.

En esa gran *región* donde el amor, ángel terrible,
No esconda como acero
En mi pecho su ala
Sonriendo lleno de gracia aérea mientras crece el tormento.

Allí donde termine este afán que exige un dueño a imagen suya,
Sometiendo a otra vida su vida,
Sin más horizonte que otros ojos frente a frente.

Donde penas y dichas no sean más que nombres,
Cielo y tierra nativos en torno de un recuerdo;
Donde al fin quede libre sin saberlo yo mismo,
Disuelto en niebla, ausencia,
Ausencia leve como carne de niño.

Allá, allá lejos;
Donde habite el olvido. (Cernuda 1974: 150)

Fernando Aramburu – "Epitafio"

¿Morir? No he muerto. Soy
estas *piedras tiradas*
sin dolor, sin conciencia,
acaso esa *porción*
de *pájaro* en la rama
o aquella hoja inmortal de *hiedra*
en tu olvido (Aramburu 2023: 190)

Si prestamos atención al poema, apreciamos la repetición del léxico perteneciente a la tradición de Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer y Luis Cernuda: las piedras sin inscripción en la rima devienen piedras sepultadas en el segundo para volverse

en Aramburu primeramente piedras tiradas, carentes de vida. A continuación, se transforman en un pájaro, y por último en una hoja de hiedra, transitando partes del paisaje natural. Con ello, el sujeto lírico profiere con elocuencia la alteridad donde yace, siendo su recuerdo atesorado en el olvido del ser querido.

Tanto en el poema becqueriano como en el del donostiarra, en el primer verso se formula una pregunta retórica a la que el sujeto lírico responde. Mientras que en la rima se habla del tópico del *homo viator*, es decir, del hombre como peregrino en los devaneos del sendero que es la vida, cerrando el poema con una estrofa que deviene una suerte de conclusión última del ser humano, en los versos de Aramburu el yo poético se muestra resignado a yacer para siempre en el olvido de la persona amada. El sujeto lírico de la rima cuestiona su pasado y se interroga sobre su futuro para concluir, muy en línea con la tradición romántica, que solo la muerte, el olvido personificado, podrá liberarle. En Aramburu vemos la misma pregunta retórica, el yo lírico manifiesta la carencia de muerte, pasando revista a los lugares donde en realidad yace: "piedras tiradas / sin dolor, sin conciencia […] esa porción / de pájaro en la rama / o aquella hoja inmortal de hiedra / en tu olvido". No ha muerto, yace en el olvido, ese limbo donde no llega la muerte a rescatar la vida del hombre, para siempre vagando entre el espacio imposible de recordar a la persona amada, flotando eternamente en el extravío. Nos hallamos ante una reconstrucción de los últimos versos del poema becqueriano: el yo poético no ha muerto, sino que se encuentra en una suerte de alegoría paisajística. La piedra solitaria de la rima encuentra su correspondiente, en primera instancia, en el título del poema, y, en segundo lugar, en las piedras tiradas que carecen de la singularidad que les otorgue sentimientos o conciencia, viva solo en el olvido. En ambas composiciones el olvido se personifica, si bien, no deja de concebir formas bien diferenciadas: el sujeto lírico de Bécquer anhela que el olvido posea su cuerpo, su sepultura en sí misma, elige un lugar remoto que acabe tanto con su sufrimiento como con su recuerdo (Mestres Morros 2015: 259); en el poema de Aramburu, el olvido se personifica en el lugar de la mente de la persona amada imposible de alcanzar, habitado por porciones de recuerdos, de imágenes, un limbo eterno. El sujeto lírico aramburiano, a diferencia del de Bécquer, anhela ser recordado, dando cuenta de ello en su propio título, un epitafio para ser recordado en lugar de piedras carentes de inscripción alguna.

En cuando al poema "Donde habite el olvido" de Luis Cernuda, el influjo de Bécquer en sus versos es evidente, deviniendo eje vertebrador del viraje hacia el intimismo en la producción cernudiana a partir de 1932 (Márquez Guerrero 2001: 147). Se trata de dos sevillanos que yerguen sus respectivas obras al abrigo

de la atmósfera andaluza que las impregna con su luz y su aire, y que los une en una afinidad de espíritu (Cano 1977: 89-94). Ambas composiciones comparten un verso: "donde habite el olvido". El olvido es en el poemario de Cernuda un término clave, "parece reclamar una suerte de reposo aniquilador: la reducción de la vida y el deseo a un mórbido silencio absoluto" (Maristany 1977: 192). Así, el olvido sería el cese del deseo, la carencia del deseo aniquilador del hombre que lo atenaza. Cernuda, apelado como "el más hondo sobrebecqueriano" por Juan Ramón Jiménez (Cano 1977: 91), da cuenta en su poema, a diferencia del de Bécquer, de un anhelo de no ser olvidado, borrar los vestigios de una vida que lo asedia de sufrimiento sin cejar, sin embargo, en el intento de ocupar algún lugar cuando dice que quiere ser "memoria de una piedra sepultada entre ortigas" (Mestres Morros 2015: 259). El olvido en el poema de Aramburu se emplaza en la línea de Cernuda, en tanto que el sujeto lírico posiciona su ser en el olvido de destellos de recuerdos cotidianos: las piedras esparcidas por el suelo, un pájaro apoyado en una rama o una hoja de hiedra. La diferencia entre ambos radica en que para Cernuda el olvido es el cese del deseo y del dolor que le infiere, el final del amor (Márquez Guerrero 2001: 149), mientras que en "Epitafio" el olvido es una porción de la memoria enterrada, asumiendo dicha región tintes cernudianos en su empeño por aferrarse a convertirse en un recuerdo indeleble, inmortal como la hoja de hiedra. Cabe destacar la acertada elección por parte del poeta al escoger la hiedra en particular. Se trata de una planta consagrada, "símbolo femenino de fuerza que necesita protección" (Cirlot 1997: 470), que embebe el poema de evocaciones del abrazo de la amada como *locus amoenus*, presente asimismo en la poesía de los Siglos de Oro (Orobitg 2001: 941-953). La hiedra aparece, precisamente, en la poesía de Garcilaso. Un ejemplo fehaciente es la "Égloga I", donde se alude al elemento de la hiedra en distintos pasajes del excelso poema. En la introducción se menciona una hiedra que remite al propio poeta, a su eternidad al abrigo del mecenas y a la lentitud del tiempo simbolizado por el movimiento parsimonioso de la hiedra (Güntert 1992: 7). La relación intertextual entre los dos fragmentos es evidente al hallamos ante una hoja de hiedra inmortal en la composición del donostiarra y, por consiguiente, eterna, la gloria del poeta en el olvido de la amada. Asimismo, los ecos de la tradición no dejan de otorgar al poema un estatismo acrecentado por la carencia de elementos de movimiento en el poema. Cabe destacar que la hiedra aparece en otros pasajes del poema garcilasiano como metáfora de la amada infiel (Bagué-Quílez 2023: 7), si bien dicha connotación difiere de lo expuesto en el texto de Aramburu.

En los tres poemas hallamos similitudes tanto en el ropaje lingüístico como en la métrica escogida, además de la concepción trágica de la vida, el dolor amoroso

que transita los versos de las *Rimas*, que Cernuda supo comprender a la perfección (Cernuda 1935: 63-64) y que Aramburu plasma de manera magistral. En cuanto al léxico, se reitera el tópico de la naturaleza alegórica poblada de sombras: sombría, sin aurora, con despojos, restos tirados, zarzas, ortigas, ramas, olvido, región del olvido o porción del olvido. En los tres poemas se presenta la imagen de la tumba: tanto Bécquer de manera explícita como Aramburu a través de su título hablan de la tumba. Sin embargo, Cernuda deja en la mente del lector la reconstrucción del fin último del sujeto lírico. La métrica de "Epitafio" da cuenta de un poeta conocedor de la tradición becqueriana y sus frecuentes versos de heptasílabos (Cano 1977: 91), construyendo los versos en su mayoría en este tipo de verso. En cuanto a la concepción vital de los poemas, los versos de Aramburu muestran ecos de la tradición becqueriana, difiriendo en que no se trata de un poema existencial donde el sujeto lírico se cuestione dónde se encuentra y adónde va, o un poema de profundo dolor por la imposibilidad de materializar el deseo como en Cernuda, sino que desenmascara el lugar donde se atesora su esencia, donde le recordarán y sobrevivirá al olvido eternizándose.

3. Historia de un verso

El célebre verso becqueriano "donde habite el olvido", que da nombre al poemario de Cernuda, cuenta con una historia literaria que se remonta a los Siglos de Oro de la literatura española, en especial al Renacimiento. Según el estudioso José Luis Cano, Bécquer solía leer a Francisco de Rioja y Fernando Herrera a las orillas del Guadalquivir, así como Cernuda, siguiendo la línea sevillana, a Francisco de Medrano, Rioja, Juan de Arguijo y al propio Bécquer (Cano 1977: 91). Por otro lado, Manuel Altoaguirre esclarece las migraciones entre los diferentes grandes exponentes de la literatura española alegando que "Luis Cernuda es un poeta hermano por su acento de Garcilaso y Bécquer, y su poesía suena dentro de la mejor tradición de la poesía española" (Altoaguirre 1977: 28). Los nombres mencionados por Cano y Altoaguirre muestran la raigambre en el que se encuentran los escritores en cuestión y las influencias que albergan sendas producciones. En este apartado se esbozarán las reverberaciones intertextuales en los diferentes poemas y sus relaciones.

El olvido elucidado por el sujeto lírico del poema de Aramburu se nutre directamente del verso "donde habite el olvido", que acumula en sí ecos de la tradición literaria española que nos llega a través de los siglos. El poema de Aramburu retoma tanto de Cernuda como de Bécquer el olvido como lugar

salvífico, con las salvedades en cuanto a los matices de cada uno de ellos anteriormente expuestos. No obstante, el célebre verso del romántico muestra a su vez resonancias de una allende tradición anterior, exponiendo aquí tres autores: Garcilaso de la Vega, Fernando Herrera y Juan de Arguijo.

Siguiendo el artículo de Miguel Ángel Márquez Guerrero (Márquez Guerrero 2001: 147-151), Bécquer recibe la tradición renacentista que siembra su poesía de reminiscencias de los Siglos de Oro. Según el estudioso, en este caso bebe del "Soneto XXXVIII" de Garcilaso de la Vega, confirmando la huella del pasado en los máximos exponentes de la Generación del 27. A modo de ejemplo, Márquez Guerrero expone el caso de Vicente Aleixandre, quien realiza una hibridación entre ambas tradiciones, garcilasiana y becqueriana, en el verso "volando a la región donde nada se olvida" (Márquez Guerrero 2001: 149):

> Estoy continuo en lágrimas bañado,
> rompiendo el aire siempre con sospiros;
> y más me duele el no osar deciros
> que he llegado por vos a tal estado;
>
> que viéndome do estoy, y lo que he andado
> por el camino estrecho de seguiros,
> si me quiero tornar para huiros,
> desmayo, viendo atrás lo que he dejado;
>
> y si quiero subir a la alta cumbre,
> a cada paso espántanme en la vía,
> ejemplos tristes de los que han caído.
>
> sobre todo, me falta ya la lumbre
> de la esperanza, con que andar solía
> por la oscura región de vuestro olvido. (De la Vega 2012: 77)

En los dos poemas de Garcilaso y Bécquer, nos hallamos ante el tópico del *homo viator*, es decir, el ser humano como peregrino que discurre por la senda de la vida desde el nacimiento hasta la muerte, un camino que entraña todo tipo de avatares, siendo en Garcilaso presente a su vez el tópico amoroso. Los versos de Cernuda entrañan la desesperación del sujeto lírico que no logra materializar el deseo que lo atenaza, siendo el olvido y la muerte la única solución posible a su profundo sufrimiento amoroso. La postura frente al olvido es diferente en sendos poemas. En Garcilaso, el sujeto lírico da cuenta de lo andado y mira

hacia el futuro con derrota, sin esperanza alguna de recibir un gesto por parte de su amada. Se trata de un poema de corte petrarquista: suspiros, lágrimas y desmayo por una dama que lo empuja a recorrer el camino del desamor, hasta llegar a la pérdida total de la esperanza y al asedio de la oscuridad. El olvido sería para Garcilaso el único lugar donde el amado puede deambular hacia la amada, sin nunca llegar a alcanzarla por hallarse, precisamente, en su olvido, su oscura región, en su indiferencia misma, con anterioridad recorrida por el amado y que ahora carece de la luz de la esperanza. En cuanto a Bécquer, se trata de una rima existencial, metafísica, que muestra la vida como un camino por el que el sujeto poético transita, revelando su desolación al recordar sus pasos. Arroja así preguntas tanto sobre un pasado aciago que lo ha llevado por la senda del sufrimiento, como por un futuro plagado de adversidades en el que solo encontrará la salvación en el olvido, es decir, la muerte, en la que incluso su recuerdo será borrado y no quedará nada, nadie le recordará. Bécquer retoma de Garcilaso una forma expresiva diáfana del sentir humano, dotándola de una sencillez que luchaba por renovar la poética desde la naturalidad (López Castro 2003: 962-963). A este propósito, Miguel González Dengra alude a la sempiterna huella que Bécquer deja en la poesía moderna, "una modernidad que tiene, como todas, sus raíces en el pasado" (González Dengra 1998: 229). La superación por parte de Bécquer del petrarquismo que Garcilaso importa de Italia, superación que no deja de retomar a Garcilaso albergando en su interior la tradición, permite a la poesía española vivir una segunda edad de oro (González Dengra 1998: 238). Juan Ramón Jiménez, el andaluz universal, expone que con Bécquer tiene lugar la entrada en la poesía contemporánea:

> la poesía española contemporánea empieza sin duda alguna en Bécquer. No podemos aceptar que en Góngora o San Juan de la Cruz o Garcilaso o los Cancioneros o el Romancero, como algunos pretenden para complicar el asunto o por secreta conveniencia, por la sencilla razón de que no son contemporáneos nuestros efectivos, y además, porque Bécquer tiene ya, por otra cuenta más propia, aparte de su contemporaneidad cronolójica, un traje moral gris moderno. (Jiménez 1982: 38)

En lo que respecta a Cernuda, el sujeto busca desesperadamente una región donde el sufrimiento por la imposibilidad de alcanzar el amor –que la realidad y el deseo coincidan– no le aflija, hallándola solo en el propio olvido. La muerte deviene así ente salvífico que lo liberará finalmente del deseo y la frustración de no poder materializarlo, además de ser el lugar que permite la supervivencia del poeta. En cuanto a los versos de Aramburu, la región oscura del toledano sirve de

pórtico para "Epitafio", mutando en un parte del paisaje, una porción de recuerdos catapultados en una suerte de limbo del pensamiento de la persona amada, la región oscura de Garcilaso.

Asimismo, en un artículo sobre el influjo de los poetas de los Siglos de Oro en Bécquer, Armando López Castro (González Dengra 1998: 967) advierte rasgos del olvido becqueriano en Fernando Herrera, fundador del Manierismo. Ambos comparten episodios vitales que contribuyen en la formación de una obra innovadora en ciertos aspectos: el espíritu platónico del petrarquismo, las experiencias amorosas complicadas y la lucha constante por alcanzar la perfección técnica (González Dengra 1998: 966-968), y es en uno de los sonetos de Herrera en el que López Castro encuentra reminiscencias intertextuales:

Soneto CI

¿Adónde me dejáis al fin perdido,
ingratas horas de mi bien pasado?
¿Por qué no lleváis todo mi cuidado,
y con favor tan corto mi sentido?

Nunca volváis del puesto conocido
a amancillar el corazón cuitado;
torced antes el curso apresurado
a la oscura región del hondo olvido.

Corred, huid con alas presurosas,
horas de mi dolor, y mi memoria
arrebatad, el vuelo acelerando.

Si sois crueles tanto, envidiosas
por usurpar la sombra de mi gloria,
que a vosotras vais mismas acabando.[4]

En ambos poemas afloran en el sujeto lírico preguntas tanto sobre el pasado como sobre el futuro, así como el tópico del *homo viator* al presentar la vida como un camino a recorrer, presente asimismo en Garcilaso. Así, al igual que sus predecesores, Bécquer, expone un pasado azaroso e ingrato, temiendo un futuro plagado de calamidades. La diferencia entre ambos poemas radica en la

[4] Herrera, Fernando, *Soneto CI*, https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/sonetos--14/html/000ca52e-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_4.html, consultada el 20/11/2023.

falta del componente amoroso en el poema becqueriano, donde nos hallamos ante una rima totalmente existencial, no amorosa, como la de Herrera y Cernuda. Para Herrera, el olvido es la indiferencia de la amada, una región donde no hay cabida para el recuerdo. En el caso de Bécquer, el olvido es la muerte incluso de su propio recuerdo, mostrando un pesimismo cósmico, ya que nadie será capaz de recordarle. En cambio, para Cernuda el olvido es el cese mismo del deseo y del sufrimiento que le atenaza al no lograr hacerlo tangible. Sus versos, de un sentimiento intenso de desolación, muestran una región del olvido que dista de las anteriores al ser el lugar donde no hay deseo. Enlazando con los versos del donostiarra, se aprecia en "Epitafio" la reiteración en la región del olvido iniciada por Garcilaso, presente de una manera análoga en los dos poemas, lugar del olvido de la persona amada por el yo poético.

En *Desde el siglo XIX: reescrituras, traducciones, transmedialidad,* Marina Bianchi presenta la triada Bécquer, Cernuda y Fernando Ortiz. Como antecedente a Bécquer, Ortiz bebería para su poema de los versos de Juan de Arguijo, poeta barroco que también habla del olvido (Bianchi 2020: 44-47).

Soneto XLIX

Pues ya del desengaño la luz pura
descubre el vano error de mi cuidado,
y del camino que escogí engañado
me reduce a otra senda mal segura.

¿Cómo no rompo el lazo que en tan dura
prisión me tiene gravemente atado?
¿Por qué tardo? ¿Qué espero, sepultado
del ciego olvido en la región oscura?

¡Afrentoso temor, tarda pereza
que estorbáis la victoria al desengaño!
Tíndase a su valor vuestra porfía;

no se diga, culpando mi flaqueza:
"Al que atrevido se arrojó en su daño,
para seguir al bien faltó osadía". (De Arguijo 1985: 203)

Bécquer hace confluir en su obra ecos de los Siglos de Oro, siendo Arguijo uno de los poetas que forman parte de su haber (López Castro 2003: 971). El soneto de Arguijo, al igual que la rima de Bécquer, arroja cuestiones sobre la

propia existencia, siendo en el caso del poeta del Barroco preguntas sobre su inexplicable comportamiento, expuesto en el momento presente. Aquí radica una diferencia entre Arguijo y Bécquer, ya que en el poema del segundo el sujeto lírico se interroga primeramente sobre el pasado para a continuación pasar al futuro. El desengaño doloroso del poema de Arguijo radica en la osadía del sujeto lírico, osadía que le lleva a la desesperanza y el desengaño del que no encuentra consuelo. Precisamente en esta desesperanza amorosa se materializa el punto de contacto entre Arguijo y Cernuda. Se trata de poemas amorosos en los que el sujeto poético no encuentra solución a la oquedad que le provoca el desamor. En el caso de Arguijo, en la pregunta "¿qué espero, sepultado del ciego olvido en la región oscura?" estriba la muerte en vida del protagonista, siendo en Cernuda el lugar donde cesa el deseo y su consiguiente desazón. En los versos de Aramburu, al igual que en los de Arguijo, el sujeto lírico se halla en el limbo del olvido del ser amado, donde yace mostrando, al contrario de lo que le ocurre al protagonista del poema de Arguijo, sosiego y resignación.

A este propósito, se muestra crucial la comparativa de los tres poemas que han impregnado el verso becqueriano que ha permitido que la tradición literaria de los Siglos de Oro llegue hasta la poesía contemporánea, además de arrojar luz a las relaciones intertextuales entre los diferentes poemas tratados.

Garcilaso de la Vega (1501-1536) – "Soneto XXXVIII"

Estoy continuo en lágrimas bañado,
rompiendo el aire siempre con sospiros;
y más me duele el no osar deciros
que he llegado por vos a tal estado;

que viéndome do estoy, y lo que he andado
por el camino estrecho de seguiros,
si me quiero tornar para huiros,
desmayo, viendo atrás lo que he dejado;

y si quiero subir a la alta cumbre,
a cada paso espántanme en la vía,
ejemplos tristes de los que han caído.

sobre todo, me falta ya la lumbre
de la esperanza, con que andar solía
por la oscura región de vuestro olvido. (De la Vega 2012: 77)

Fernando Herrera (1534-1597) – "Soneto CI"

¿Adónde me dejáis al fin perdido,
ingratas horas de mi bien pasado?
¿Por qué no lleváis todo mi cuidado,
y con favor tan corto mi sentido?

Nunca volváis del puesto conocido
a amancillar el corazón cuitado;
torced antes el curso apresurado
a la oscura región del hondo olvido.

Corred, huid con alas presurosas,
horas de mi dolor, y mi memoria
arrebatad, el vuelo acelerando.

Si sois crueles tanto, envidiosas
por usurpar la sombra de mi gloria,
que a vosotras vais mismas acabando.[5]

Juan de Arguijo (1567-1623) – "Soneto XLIX"

Pues ya del desengaño la luz pura
descubre el vano error de mi cuidado,
y del camino que escogí engañado
me reduce a otra senda mal segura.

¿Cómo no rompo el lazo que en tan dura
prisión me tiene gravemente atado?
¿Por qué tardo? ¿Qué espero, *sepultado*
del ciego olvido en la región oscura?

¡Afrentoso temor, tarda pereza
que estorbáis la victoria al desengaño!
Tíndase a su valor vuestra porfía;

no se diga, culpando mi flaqueza:
"Al que atrevido se arrojó en su daño,
para seguir al bien faltó osadía". (De Arguijo 1985: 203)

[5] Herrera, Fernando, *Soneto CI*, https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/sonetos--14/html/000ca52e-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_4.html, Consultada el 20/11/2023.

En los tres textos es evidente, además del tópico del amor no correspondido por la dama, el del *homo viator*, es decir, el hombre que camina cual peregrino por las sendas de la vida. La reverberación intertextual en cuanto al olvido se muestra evidente, ya que el sujeto lírico de los tres poemas es consciente de que su sino es que su recuerdo perdure en la región oscura del olvido. Sin embargo, la postura frente al olvido de los tres poetas difiere. Herrera expone una actitud que dista de la que encontramos en Garcilaso, dando fe del cambio de paradigma del estilo propio del Renacimiento al del Manierismo que, no obstante, no deja de plasmar la región donde se atesora lo que no se quiere, o no se puede, recordar. El sujeto lírico se interroga sobre el dolor que la dama le confiere a través de un lenguaje sincero y desesperanzado. Espera que los recuerdos dolorosos vuelen de su memoria, que se los arranquen para alcanzar así la paz. En el caso de Garcilaso, la dama rechaza al protagonista, quien ni es capaz de declarar su amor, mientras que en el soneto herreriano es el sujeto lírico quien rechaza el inmenso dolor que le infringe el comportamiento de la amada, invitándola a no reiterar en sus acciones y a guardar sus desdenes en su propio olvido, es decir, que se desvanezca de su vida como deberían desaparecer los recuerdos tristes. Para estos dos poetas, el olvido sería el lugar donde yace la indiferencia, la carencia, la nada. En el poema de Arguijo, el olvido radica donde se encuentra el protagonista mismo, como muerto en vida, y se cuestiona cómo ha llegado ahí y por qué no consigue alejarse. Los tres poemas dan fe de un sujeto poético que consciente de haber incurrido en errores en el pasado que le acarrean el sufrimiento actual, pasando del estoicismo de Garcilaso, al arrebatamiento de Herrera y la desesperanza de Arguijo.

Sin lugar a duda, los versos de Garcilaso de la Vega influyen en toda la poética posterior dejando una huella indeleble. En el poeta renacentista se evidencia la desesperanza y desesperación por el amor no correspondido y el andar azaroso por el sendero de la vida, pero no llega al desengaño barroco que es palpable en los tres siguientes poetas, haciéndose tangible especialmente en los versos "Al que atrevido se arrojó en su daño, / para seguir al bien faltó osadía" de Arguijo, donde el atrevimiento es un rasgo característico. Por consiguiente, el desengaño barroco, ausente en los versos de Garcilaso, resalta en los demás poetas, entrando en juego las contrariedades de su época. Asimismo, es bien sabida la predilección de Bécquer por Garcilaso (López Castro 2003: 961-964), por lo que se podría concluir que los versos del sevillano retoman los del poeta soldado toledano.

Podríamos concluir que los versos aramburianos siguen la estela estoica de Garcilaso, a pesar de tener en común con Herrera y Arguijo, al igual que sucede

en la rima becqueriana, la presencia de una pregunta retórica. El uso de este recurso atrapa al lector despertando su interés hacia la imagen que el yo poético quiere transmitir. En este caso, resalta la alegoría de la naturaleza en la que, por ejemplo, la piedra tirada cobra conciencia. El sujeto lírico perdura vivo solo y exclusivamente en el olvido de la amada, al igual que sucede en el poema de Arguijo, vivido no tanto con desesperanza sino con estoicismo.

Fernando Aramburu sabe plasmar en su composición la tradición española que, como hemos visto, remonta al Renacimiento español, heredero del petrarquismo, pasando por Bécquer y su modernización de la lírica española hasta llegar a Cernuda y la contemporaneidad.

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Animism as a Key to Remodelling Modern Environmental Ethics: An Ecocritical Reading of *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke

Abstract

The article recognizes the need to complement the existing criticism on *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke with acknowledgement of the deep concern for current environmental problems evinced by that text. Employing ecocritical literary theory, it calls into question the dichotomy between fantasy literature and contemporary concerns of the primary reality. By exploring two alternative models of human relationship with the House, the secondary world entered by the characters of that portal fantasy novel, the article seeks to prove that they may serve as actual models of environmental practices and ethical stances on the relationship between man and nature. It argues that *Piranesi* proposes a certain form of animism as a solution to modern man's alienation from his natural environment. Moreover, it suggests that a return to the child-like state of wonder and recognition of one's multidimensional connection with one's place of living is a necessary remedy for the science and greed-driven devastations of nature. The novel's environmental ethics are interpreted in the context of Barfield's concept of Original Participation. Using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the article establishes Clarke's House as an example of heterotopia of compensation stressing the contemporary cultural silence of the Earth.

Keywords: ecocriticism, heterotopia, portal fantasy, animism, original participation

1. Introduction

According to Lynn White "what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship" (1996: 12). Given the current ecological crisis, contemporary views on nature and the role of man in the environment are most likely flawed and urgently need rethinking and correction. Where can we go in search of guidance or alternative models of relationships with nature, which could help us change our ethics and better respond to the ecological dilemmas and problems of contemporary times? Literature, especially fantasy literature,

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mimics the primary reality, yet simultaneously frees itself from its constraints. It constitutes one of the spaces that may serve as "laborator[ies] of the possible" and "experimental fields of alternative realities", according to Bertrand Westphal (2007: 63, 59). This paper's aim is to present the ways in which *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke suggests nonconformist and unconventional views of nature and serves as a model of the man-nature relationship.

Despite its brilliance, *Piranesi* does not offer much novelty in terms of narrative solutions, imagery, or ideas. The author is not hesitant to acknowledge multiple influences and literary sources, such as The *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, Jorge Luis Borges' *Labyrinth*, or the art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi[1]. The novel is intertextually indebted to many literary traditions, such as epistolary novels, detective stories, or the topos of fairy abduction among others[2]. Through creative recycling of established literary solutions the author links the past with the present, and illuminates the future with a ray of hope. Moreover, as will be demonstrated later, *Piranesi* is also a text anchored in ecocritical thought, making use of well-known ecological metaphors and images. This paper shall also pay particular attention to the contribution of Owen Barfield's anthropological concepts to Clarke's construction of the relationship between her characters and their environment and the implications and applicability of these models for the humans inhabiting the primary reality.

2. Reasons for treating *Piranesi* as a site of discussion of the primary world's problems

Despite its recent publication date (September 2020), critics have already interpreted *Piranesi* in various ways. Biographical reviews have attributed the author's choice of subjects, such as solitude, imprisonment and mental disorder, to her own experiences of prolonged illness confining her in the closed domestic space (e.g. Sinha 2021). More abstract interpretations have seen the House presented in the novel as an allegory of imagination (e.g. Phillips 2020) or "a Renaissance memory palace" (Martin 2020). It can also be argued further that Piranesi's life embodies the process of creative writing, during which an author,

[1] Clarke spoke of these works as direct sources of inspiration during Waterstones Online Event celebrating the publication of *Piranesi*: an interview with Madeline Miller: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQHhFyQbLoE

[2] See Błaszkiewicz, "On the Idea of the Secondary World in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*" for a discussion of the topos of fairy abduction in *Piranesi*.

like Clarke's hero, inhabits a magical realm of fantasy alone. Once the novel is published, the author is also banished from that world, and may enter it only occasionally in reminiscences. *Piranesi* has also been viewed as a book exploring the topic of mental illness (e.g. Tomko 2023), a manual on coping with difficult circumstances and the art of adaptation, as well as a representation of confinement and solitude that was a part of experience of the pandemic of coronavirus (e.g. Schnelbach 2021). *Piranesi* is therefore an indescribable story, which escapes easy categorization and proves relevant in diverse contexts. However, to state what a book of such magnificence, complexity and ambiguity is about is to give a highly subjective picture of readerly response. What is more, the author herself might well have been alluding in *Piranesi* to one of the abovementioned issues or none of them. The novel may consciously or unintentionally echo the sentiments experienced by Clarke and, potentially, it could have helped her to work through her traumas, but it could also have been a text with a much more general relevance and application. This paper does not claim precedence over other interpretations of *Piranesi* and, above all, does not intend to reveal the author's intentions, but it seeks to complement the abovementioned readings by pointing to the environmental awareness of the text.

Ostensibly, *Piranesi* does not touch upon the most severe ecological maladies of our times, as it never acknowledges the climate change, the problem of pollution, the accelerating extinction of species etc. How can such a book be considered part of the modern discussion on ecology? How can a novel set in a fantastic secondary world governed by the rules so different from ours tell us anything meaningful about preservation of biodiversity on Earth or about lowering the emission of greenhouse gases? Perhaps counterintuitively, fantasy and science fiction literature, frequently considered to be out of touch with reality or critricized for being a downright escape from the troubles of the primary world, are often more dedicated to the current ecological problems than regular fiction. Grim catastrophic and dystopian visions of the future cynically respond to the anxieties of the modern society. Science fiction presenting ecodisasters occurring on other planets informs us about human tendency to repeat ecological mistakes. Secondary worlds inspired by Tolkien's works speak of fragility of ecosystems. According to Ann Swinfen "all serious fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience and is relevant to human living. Its major difference from the realist novel is that it takes account of areas of experience – imaginative, subconscious, visionary – which free the human spirit to range beyond the limits of empirical primary world reality" (2019: 231).

Relevance of fantasy and science fiction stems from the fact that these genres of literature ultimately are not devoted to magic or fantastic creatures but to "the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm" (Tolkien 2008: 32). They explore the human condition, attitudes, values and actions employing fantastic circumstances, which are often more dangerous, extreme or stimulating than the reality of the modern life of ordinary people. Returning to the main focus of this paper, the relevance of *Piranesi* for the contemporary ecological dilemmas results from its engagement with the question of the relationship between man and the world, which, as was observed above, is a fundamental aspect of ecology.

3. Piranesi's relationship with the House and the function of the House in the novel

Tolkien himself refuted the accusation that literature set in fantastic secondary worlds is worthless due to its embracing of escapism as a rightful temporary liberation of the mind and soul from the tediousness and ugliness of reality (2008: 73). According to Tolkien, the escapes that fantasy offers convey universal human desires, e.g. the talking animals commonplace in fairy stories speak of the desire "as ancient as the Fall" to "converse with other living things" (Tolkien, 2008: 73). The idea that humans once did not consider themselves apart from other living things (as well as inanimate objects and phenomena such as the moon, wind, stones, or even maladies) and believed in the possibility of communicating with them was developed by Owen Barfield under the name of Original Participation (1957). It remains in contrast with the prevalent attitude of modern people, who grant themselves cultural primacy, believing themselves to be exceptions, singular entities apart from the whole kingdom of living organisms, not to mention landscape. "Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process" (White 1996: 12). Tolkien and Barfield were the Inklings, hence it is not surprising to trace Barfield's ideas concerning the evolution of human consciousness in Tolkien's works. In *On Fairy Stories* he wrote about the "men of the unrecorded past" who did not develop the sense of separation from other living creatures and did not share the guilt that lies on men of the modern era who have "broken off relations" with nature (2008: 74). Human vision of the world before the onset of advanced civilizations clearly was not anthropocentric, and there are proofs that animism was a universal system of belief and practice among early human societies (Manes 1996: 18). Hunter-gatherers spoke to trees, animals, and the

Sun, believing them to be inhabited by intelligence comparable to themselves, and they also considered themselves capable of receiving and understanding the "language" of nature. Barfield described that phenomenon as a type of belief or conviction; Clarke goes a step further in *Piranesi*. Her immoral scientist Arne-Sayles is confident that humans not only used to speak to the elements of the natural world but also that communication between human beings and the world was real and tangible. As Arne-Styles explains to Piranesi: "Once, men and women were able to turn themselves into eagles and fly immense distances. They communed with rivers and mountains and received wisdom from them. They felt the turning of the stars inside their own minds" (88). Elsewhere, Arne-Sayles ideas are summarized in a conclusion: "the world was constantly speaking to Ancient Man (…) this dialogue between the Ancients and the world was not simply something that happened in their heads; it was something that happened in the actual world (148). This magic of communication, "wisdom of the ancients" (89) had been neglected and discarded by people until it finally left the world of humans, seeping into another world called the House. Eventually, the ancient Knowledge leaked also out of the House. Arne-Sayles thinks it irrevocably lost; his former student, Ketterley, is fruitlessly looking for it in the House, while Piranesi, the hero and the narrator of the novel, actually possesses that ability to communicate with the House, yet he is ironically unaware that this very skill is the mastery of the Great and Secret Knowledge that Ketterley is searching for in vain.

Piranesi inhabits the House, which is a vast labyrinth consisting of monumental halls and vestibules full of stone statues of various sizes and shapes. It is repeatedly inundated by ocean waves, which Piranesi tries to chart and predict in order to avoid drowning. He believes that he shares the House with Ketterley, whom he calls "the Other" who in fact only visits that world from time to time. Piranesi therefore lives completely alone in the House as the only living creatures inhabiting the House apart from him are a few species of animals, such as albatrosses, rooks, sparrows and fish. Due to the mental consequences of the prolonged stay in the House, Piranesi does not remember that Ketterley imprisoned him in the House, and treats the scientist as his dear friend. Likewise, the House is not a prison for the hero, but a beloved domestic space; he equates the House with the entire world as he no longer remembers his former life on Earth and the House encompasses all reality for him. Despite meager nature of his existence and the inhospitably cold, wet stone halls devoid of greenery, Piranesi is grateful for the kindness of the House and extolls its beauty and goodness towards him on nearly every other page of the journal, which is the content of the novel.

However, it would be wrong to treat the House as a mere setting for the action of the novel. The role of the House in *Piranesi* is rather that of a central character, the true "other" for Piranesi, who forms his new identity and personality in relation with the place in which he inhabits. This observation is corroborated by Farah Mendlesohn's stance that "the primary character in the portal fantasy is the land" (2008: 28).[3] Some critics, Scott Sanders among them, have commented that modern fiction feels barren, and that emptiness comes from lack of nonhuman context and acknowledgement of wilderness (1996: 183). Modern fiction devoted solely to human business pretends that there is nothing worth mentioning beyond its limited scope. This anthropocentric illusion is a weakness of which *Piranes*i is free. Fantasy works such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or *Piranesi* are such compelling reads because in them human affairs are just specks against the living wild uncontrolled environment, the secondary reality. In *Piranesi's* foreground there is the House, which is a vision of an environment beyond human capacity to understand and encompass. It is alive, magical, vast, and strange, as well as wild but it has a potential to become a beloved home to those who come to love it thus forgetting the modern vision of the material world rooted in utility.

Old entries from the journal reveal that in his former life Piranesi (known previously as Matthew Rose Sorensen) had a distinctly different character. He was an ambitious, proud and sophisticated academic doing extensive research to author a book. Piranesi, on the other hand, a Child but also a product of the House, is a naïve, charming, absolutely innocent, humble, grateful, and inquisitive man. The House exerts substantial influence on all human beings, causing amnesia, mental collapse, and personality modifications, yet the range and power of its impact is varied and seems to depend on the quality of the character exposed to it. Several people died while imprisoned in the House, either because they had not learnt to cooperate with the House and fend for themselves, or because they had gone mad. This supposedly malevolent impact of the House is a legacy of the fairy abduction topos, which Clarke explored explicitly in her former novel, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell*[4]. In *Piranesi* the idea of madness or amnesia induced by the fairy world serves as an element crucial for the development of the plot and the hero's character.

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[3] According to Mendlesohn's definition *Piranesi* can be qualified as a portal fantasy: "A portal fantasy is simply a fantastic world entered through a portal" (XIX).

[4] In *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norell* human characters are abducted and imprisoned in the Kingdom of Lost Hope by a fairy named the Gentleman with the Thistledown Hair or forced to join balls happening there every night.

Piranesi's relationship with the House is contrasted in the novel with the Other's approach to that world. Both men consider themselves to be scientists, yet they mean different things by it. Piranesi is an explorer who bases his research on first-hand observation and his main interests are the ways of the House, cycles of its waves, structure of the labyrinth, its weather conditions, and the statues that crowd the halls. He is a naturalist who takes keen interest in what he sees; the search for the mysterious Great and Secret Knowledge is of no consequence for him. He is aware that the House's essence cannot be extracted and that the House provides everything that he, "the Child of the House" needs, which excludes all the magical powers that Ketterley desires. Piranesi feels abandoned by the Other in his admiration of the House and he experiences a pressing urge to "bear witness to the Splendours of the World" (6), hence his scientific inquiries are complemented by an aesthetic and somewhat religious adoration. He is a scientist using contemplation and imagination as primary manners of acquiring knowledge. His reverence is reflected by the capital letters always used by him in his journal to write the name of the House or any of its components or features. For him the process of naming the statues and halls is not an act of taking possession but a way of familiarizing himself with the House. Piranesi wants to catalogue, name and chart the House in an attempt to domesticate that space and make the world his home. Perhaps this penchant for naming is also dictated by Piranesi's insecurity concerning his own identity. "Knowing a place is knowing yourself" (Shepard 1977: 32) and since Piranesi is convinced that he was born in the House, he wants to understand himself and learn the purpose of his life through knowing the world that he inhabits.

As observed above, the story is narrated in the form of first-person entries in a journal written by Piranesi, who appears to be a reliable and objective narrator with a scrupulous scientific mind, whose memory, however, plays tricks on him. Conventionally, the protagonist provides the reader with a "guided tour of the landscapes" and unravels the mystery of the fantasy world along with the reader (Mandlesohn 2008: XIX). Nevertheless, the reader must not rely solely on the narrator's subjective discourse in forming a picture of the House. The split in the narrator's personality and Piranesi's scrupulous transcriptions of his conversations with Ketterley, Arne-Sayles, Rafael and James Ritter allow for certain plurality of perspectives. While Piranesi is a devoted follower of the House, the entries written by Matthew Rose Sorensen shortly after his imprisonment in the House express his wild anger and despair, and, expectedly, reveal none of his future attachment to his prison. His description of that world contains many

negatively coloured expressions: he feels "vast emptiness", hears "a dull thud" (182) and perceives the statues as "inscrutable" (78). Ketterley sees the House as "endless dreary rooms all the same, full of decaying figures covered with bird shit" (47), where nothing lives. Like Arne-Sayles, he is afraid of its effects on human mind and seems disappointed with the House, which he expected to contain the Great and Secret Knowledge. Rafael, the policewoman who rescues Piranesi, finds solace and peace of mind in the House and visits it willingly; she also learns from Piranesi to admire the beauty of that world. James Ritter, a former prisoner of the House, shares Piranesi's affection and adherence to that world. When Piranesi helps him visit the House, he begins to cry "for happiness" (239) and does not want to leave it. However, despite the seemingly positive relationship with the House, Ritter barely survived his sojourn in it, and many others, including other prisoners, Giussani and Ovenden, as well as D'Agostino, who apparently visited the House of her own accord, paid for it with their lives. Thus Piranesi's extremely positive relationship with the House is rendered slightly precarious by the plurality of visions and emotions towards the House expressed by other characters, or by Sorensen' initial reactions to the world. In the end, that plurality of opinions is ultimately compromised by the fact that the novel is a narrative of one man, and this narrator filters contrasting opinions. Piranesi is often mistaken about the intentions of the House, for example, he thinks that one of the female skeletons that he found in the labyrinth, whom he calls the Folded-Up Child, was intended as a wife for him, when in fact it was the remains of Sylvia D'Agostino[5]. The protagonist is also convinced that the House is the benevolent creator of everything, when in actually it is a derivative of the human world, a residue of forgotten ideas, a quasi-Platonic world of ideals. There are several disturbing questions left unanswered by the novel: How can the House be kind when it erases memories? It is really an intelligent presence or a hostile desert with no consciousness? For Piranesi the answer to these questions is obvious but Clarke seems to intentionally leave the status of the House open. Piranesi's relationship with the House may be read either as an instance of Barfield's Original Participation, a one-sided animism (ultimately reduced to a figment of his imagination) or a picture of the unique "magical" communication with the world.

[5] Sylvia D'Agostino died in the House long before Piranesi first entered it and her fate was completely unconnected to his. The idea that she was intended to be his wife originated with Piranesi alone.

Acknowledgement of the controversy concerning Piranesi's relationship with the House does not exclude the environmental value of the novel, yet it is necessary for its honest analysis. Whether Piranesi's communication with the House is real or imaginary, it still serves as a model of human communication with nature. Likewise, whether his child-like state of wonder and openness are imposed on him by the House or not, they still make him a better man. Finally, whether his relationship with the House is mutual or one-sided, it allows him to survive and make the best of the difficult circumstances.

4. *Piranesi*'s environmental message

The aim of this article is to propose reading the House as a metaphor for the Earth, and to consider Ketterley's arrogant treatment of the House and Piranesi's loving relationship with it as models of disparate human relationships with their home planet. The metaphor is a well-established manner of presenting human responsibility for nature in environmental texts, and seems to resonate with both scientists and the general public[6]. *Piranesi*, a fantasy novel, offers us important environmental wisdom by employing a metaphor already functioning in the scientific world. Like every metaphor, the "Earth as home" simile is both revealing and obscuring, or, in other words "it reveals by concealing" (Hills 2022); and in seeking a connection between two diverse objects, ideas or phenomena, it deliberately ignores the mismatched features of the two.

Since for Piranesi the House is both wilderness and unknown territory, which he explores with fascination, as well as domestic space, where he feels comfortable and at home, and which he is constantly naming and taming, he does not distinguish between domestic space and wilderness. The two concepts are a product of advanced civilizations, and many animist societies do not even have words to describe this opposition (Manes 1996: 18). Piranesi's habitat is also a mixture of two other binary opposites corresponding to the previous pair, namely nature and culture. The House is a world resembling a building filled with stone statues. Its structure and its shape are therefore derived from the

[6] For example, see "Metaphor and Visions of Home in Environmental Writing" by Alison Steinbach, for a discussion of two specific environmental texts employing the Earth as home metaphor. See "The Earth is our Home: Systemic Metaphors to Redefine our Relationship with Nature" by Paul H. Thibodeau et. al for a more in-depth study encompassing many heterogenous texts.

area belonging to the human world that remains in dichotomy with nature in the modern Western vision of material space, namely art, the apex of culture. However, the House is also a place governed by the elements: it displays seasonal changes in the weather, its waves are a wild force beyond anyone's control, and its birds, seaweed, and corals transform it from a pristine museum into a nature-reclaimed space. It is a world of nature and culture's fundamental coexistence and intimate combination. Hence, the construction of the House and Piranesi's relationship with it undermine the foundational divide on which modern anthropology is based –that of human vs. nature. Błaszkiewicz also points out "a lack of clear differentiation between the physical and the metaphysical" in the construction of the House characteristic for "early natural philosophers" (2021: 119) predating Plato and Aristotle, who established the distinction. This aspect of the secondary world of *Piranesi* is the cornerstone of the hero's ability to interact intimately with that world and it is a basis of Barfield's concept of Original Participation. Interestingly, Piranesi's favourite sculpture depicts a faun, a creature crossing another fundamental divide –that between man and animals. Other sculptures important for Piranesi are also hybrids, namely the Minotaurs, The Horned Giants, as well as representations of animals: the Fox, the Gorilla, and the Woman carrying a Beehive containing some bees. As Piranesi is one with the space that he inhabits, he also embraces and tries to communicate with the non-human inhabitants of the House. His love for the Statue of the Faun is a symbol of his openness to interspecific relationships and embrace of animals as elements of the metaphysical continuum of the House. There are few animals in the House and the species that do appear in it are genetically distant from humans (birds, crustaceans, fish), yet Piranesi speaks to them and reads their behaviour in a manner that illustrates his belief in immanence of the quasi-divine intelligent spirit in the material aspects of the world. Like early Christians who treated the world as a symbolic system of meaning through which God spoke to people (White 1996: 11), he associates various archetypal statues with meanings and lessons and treats them as personal messages. However, unlike influential Christian thinkers[7], Piranesi is not convinced that the world exists solely to serve people; for him "the House is valuable because it is the House. It is enough in and of Itself. It is not the means to an end" (61).

[7] Obviously, this is an oversimplification of the matter, yet many eccritics point to human utilitarian approach to nature as rooted in the Christian axiom of nature's servile role in human salvation.

Ketterley, on the other hand, is a scientist of the intangible; he wants to find the Great and Secret Knowledge in the House in order to gain certain superhuman skills, for example, the ability to vanquish Death, penetrate lesser minds, be invisible (46). He is a vain man of mediocre imagination and creativity, seeking to compensate for his scientific failure by acquiring magical powers. Arne-Sayles calls him "an egotist" who always thinks "in terms of utility" (64). That utilitarianism seems to be a universal approach to all the "others" that Ketterley interacts with. He imprisons Piranesi, abandons him in the House, and treats him with arrogance and superiority as if he were his private servant, field researcher, and provider of data. The House has no intrinsic value for him either, but constitutes merely a means to an end as well as a constant threat and a growing disappointment.

Ketterley spend as little time as is necessary in the House and his research is based solely on the data provided by Piranesi and Arne-Sayles' vision of the Lost Knowledge. The results of those circumstances are his detachment and estrangement from that world. Although he is scientifically interested in the House, he is a stranger to it and suffers the consequences of that in the final moments of his life, when the sudden surge of waves drowns him. Hence, while Piranesi is an inhabitant of the House, Ketterley is a tourist figure, a visitor, who is unable to bond with the place. His scientific pursuits resembling spiritualistic-magical rituals are supposed to lead to the discovery of the Lost Knowledge, which is the human ability to communicate with the world. Piranesi, who has mastered that skill unconsciously, recognizes vanity and futility of these rituals. Ketterley, a sceptical and wary tourist, is structurally unable to find the language of communication with the House as he lacks the necessary child-like state of wonder and openness, and his attitude towards the material world is anthropocentric to the core. For Ketterley the world is silent and must be forced to listen to humans to do their bidding. That silence is the context in which modern human "ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished" (Manes 1996: 16). Piranesi, to whom "the World speaks (…) every day" (107), displays a humble disposition towards the House, aesthetic consciousness of its beauty, trust in its kindness, and awareness of the fragility of its ecosystem. He "hears" the House through his eyes, nose, hands and heart, and such hearing is out of reach of Ketterley, who would rather have the House perform his orders than listen to its advice and warnings or even cooperate with it for his own survival. Ironically, in his deafness to the House's "speech" Ketterley is ignorant of the very power that he is searching for and of the means of his own rescue.

Ketterley treats his scientific pursuits as a heroic undertaking, conceived of as a victory over the House. Moreover, he believes that conducting scientific

research allows him to reach for unethical solutions. According to Ursula LeGuin, technology and science are perceived in modern Western culture as heroic undertakings, a battle with the elements (1996: 153). The outcome may only be triumph or tragedy, and in case of Ketterley the outcome is the tragedy of his death. His heroic persistence at first earns him Piranesi's admiration, yet the protagonist abandons him when he realizes that Ketterley is unable to recognize any intrinsic value in the House and treats it as an opponent, who must be stripped of his armour and left to rot. Recognizing egoism and shortsightedness intrinsic in his companion's scientific undertaking Piranesi concludes: "I realised that the search for the Knowledge has encouraged us to think of the House as if it were a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted, and that if ever we discover the Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been wrested from the House and all that remains will be mere scenery" (60).

Piranesi's identity, attitude, and character traits are shaped by the House and are essential for his communication with it. When Matthew Rose Sorensen becomes imprisoned in the House, he is unhappy, angry and unable to interact with the world. However, the impact of the House on his psyche erases not only his memory but also primary cultural assumptions and instincts nurtured by his society in relation to the material world and nature. Piranesi is not demanding of the House, but rather, he is grateful for the origin of his meagre sustenance. He is not silencing the world with his arrogance but instead he is attuned to its "voice". He is not seeking his own comfort but amplification of the beauty of the House. Finally, he does not feel supreme to this world but an integral part of it, having as much right to live in it as other creatures.

Piranesi's communication with the House is often verbal: he prays to the House and at one point in the story he actually hears the statue of the Faun talking to him (108-109). However, this communication is often also subliminal. Piranesi knows that he is the "Beloved Child of the House" (113) and the source of that knowledge must have been the House, yet the narrator never explicitly relates the moment of its reception. It comes from his intuitive awareness, a metaphysical perception of the intentions and attitudes of the House. Piranesi also experiences a Vision (at the coming of the albatross) and a Revelation (when looking at the fool moon), which indicate his sensitivity to the irrational, the spiritual, the unknown, and readiness for reception of symbolic meaning of reality[8]. This is best represented

[8] Piranesi's first meeting with the albatross and his subsequent devotion to these birds is a direct allusion to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge. In the ballad, the

in moments, in which he studies behaviour of birds decoding their alighting on particular statues as a series of meaningful bits of information. Once, when he notices a flock of small birds, he calls out to them: "I am paying attention! (…) What is it that you wish to say to me?" (42). The birds not only warn him against poor haul of fish but also help him recover his lost memory.

How can Piranesi's interactions with the House be a model for modern society's approach to the Earth? On a very basic level, Piranesi displays ecological wisdom consisting in his awareness of his own entanglement with the House. He preserves the beauty and cleanliness of his surroundings, gathers only as much of food as he is able to eat, burns trash that he finds in the House, recycles old objects, and requires an absolute minimum of man-made items, hence his everyday practices are dictated by his direct reliance on the House for his survival. Piranesi can thus serve as our conscience, enveloped as we are in the Western civilization's epidemic of consumerism. Our avaricious materialism results in considerable pollution of the natural environment displaying our blindness regarding our dependency on Earth for our very sustenance. On a less tangible level, Piranesi's animistic approach to the world in which he lives can be read as something belonging at once to the distant past as a universal response of man to nature in the childhood of humanity (in Barfield's opinion), and a thing of the future. Once Piranesi's mind is cleared of his cultural background, he develops a loving relationship with the place that he inhabits, thus allowing it to become a source of his identity. Piranesi, the "Beloved Child of the House" is a child also in another sense. His naivety and trustworthiness, as well as his animism, are the features associated with child psyche. According to Piaget, a child in the pre-operational stage of development believes that the world is alive, conscious, intelligent and has a purpose[9]. Thus animism presents itself as a fundamental human response to nature, which is replaced by civilization and the process of acculturation and education resulting in adoption of a more objectifying and often utilitarian approach.

Barfield's theses resonate with Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage, which has been stereotypically attached to various indigenous groups with negative consequences. However, environmental writers still use the optimistic view of

killing of an innocent bird by a sailor is punished by God with a severe curse, teaching the man that "He prayeth well who loveth best,/ All things both great and small:/ For the dear God, who loveth us, /He made and loveth all" (lines 657-650). The intertextual allusion additionally casts Piranesi as a morally correct person with regard to his relationship with the natural world through his instinctive respect and affection for albatrosses.

9 See Part II of Piaget's *The Child's Concept of the World.*

human nature in their studies, emphasizing the ecological wisdom of Indigenous practices[10]. Clarke seems to encourage the association of Piranesi with the concept of the Noble Savage by attributing the hero with certain features that fit into the stereotype. Piranesi is the only black-skinned person in the novel; he wears rags and walks without shoes; he is an animist displaying a religious admiration of the material world in which he lives; he is dominated and treated contemptuously by a white man; finally, he is a forager. His instinctive interaction with the House is the proper manner in which the House wishes to be treated and his pure and naive heart is the source of his submissive nature. However, Piranesi in the end dismantles the stereotype by also being a scientifically-oriented man with keen mind, who learns the truth about his condition from his own scrupulous writings. The discovery allows him to shed the yoke of bondage imposed on him by Ketterley and become the master of his own fate.

The third layer of meaning connected with Piranesi's status of a "child" refers to his child-like dependence on the House for his survival and the life-giving force of the House. Piranesi believes that he is the "Beloved Child of the House" because he cannot remember his real family and childhood, and as a result he thinks that he was in some manner created by the House and raised in it. Consequently, his reverence for the world imitates a parent-child relationship and is reminiscent of the ancient personification of nature as the Mother Earth. This multi-layered sense of entanglement with the House allows Piranesi to overcome his confusion regarding his origins, his name and his purpose. Unlike a modern man often experiencing a sense of confusion, isolation and insecurity, Piranesi is calm, fulfilled and satisfied. He does not know his name but he knows who he is because of his relationship with the place in which he lives.

In his critique of the modern urban life depriving men of "the sensation of being part of a known place" Neil Evernden states: "What does make sense, however, is something that most in our society could not take seriously: animism. For once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the "environment" then of course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate-it is animate because we are a part of it" (1996: 101). The lost sense of a place may be retrieved according to Evernden by the Pathetic Fallacy, metaphorical thinking of nature, or in other words – cognitive animism. The Earth is our House and unless we begin to perceive it as a living thing, we will never experience ourselves

[10] For example, see Fairhead and Leach, "False Forest History, Complicit Social Analysis: Rethinking Some West African Environmental Narratives".

as a vital part of it, nurtured and supported by it through our lives. Piranesi finds a connection with the World discarded by humanity at the advent of civilization through an animist approach to it. Hence, the hero's approach encourages us to discard our utilitarian mode of thinking about the Earth and instead to treat it as a live interlocutor. Through her novel Clarke seems to imply that our world, like the House, is not silent, only we behave like the deaf Ketterley, unwilling to connect with it, remain within it, and listen. Susan Jeffers explains how humans can communicate with nature, taking into consideration a literal interpretation of that concept: "To listen to the environment is, practically speaking, to observe its reaction to human actions, and to understand its rhythms, practices, and habits. It is to recognize, in our minds, our lives, and our policy making, that there is life out there beyond our own, and that we are connected to it" (2014: 5).

Traditional modern ecology supports the claim that humans are the greatest threat to the natural ecosystems and that nature thrives best if it is left uninhabited and not interfered with[11]. For example, this belief is reflected by establishment of the national parks, which on the one hand restrict human presence, but on the other hand allow for ecotourism, thus continuing negative human effects on nature. However, more recent studies speak of virtual disappearance of intact natural ecosystems. Instead, they speak of multiple and irreversible entanglement of humans with nature described as Anthropocene, a new geophysical era in which humans constitute the greatest transforming power irrevocably changing the Earth's environments and leaving a lasting geological imprint. Such vision of human impact on the natural world erases the probability of man's withdrawal from pristine ecosystems as it abolishes the very possibility of their existence in the modern era. Within the anthropocentric vision of human relationship with the world there are no pristine ecosystems left on Earth, and the distinction between the artificial and the natural has been blurred by the pervasive human interference. One consequence of this situation is the impracticality of the outdated ecological axiom that nature should be left untamed and unprotected, as Elizabeth Kolbert suggests: "What's got to be managed is not a nature that exists – or is imagined to exist – apart from the human. Instead, the new effort begins with a planet remade and spirals back on itself –not so much the control of nature as the *control of* the control of nature" (2021: 3). Kolbert does not advocate human withdrawal from nature because nature is unable to deal with the consequences of human-induced

[11] For example, see the conclusion of a study by Jones et.al., "Restoration and repair of Earth's damaged ecosystems".

changes. Instead, she calls for responsible management of the continuums consisting of natural elements of the old environments and the alterations and "controls" introduced by humans.

The above discussion allows for an extended reading of the House from *Piranesi* as a metaphor for the Earth. Piranesi is the only human being living in the House. At one point in the novel he considers leaving that reality and experiences grave doubts and remorse. He says: "If I leave, then the House will have no Inhabitant and how will I bear the thought of it Empty?" (157). His instinctive ability to communicate with the House allows him to claim that "the World (…) wishes an Inhabitant for Itself to be a witness to its Beauty and the recipient of its Mercies" (157). The House, which was created out of the lost magic consisting in human ability to communicate with the natural world, seems to realize its full potential in its interaction with a human being. Piranesi temporarily leaves the House to seek human company, yet he returns regularly to it, sometimes introducing others to its beauty, because he misses the tranquillity and solitude of that world as well as his relationship with it. Clarke's novel is thus a vision of people's deep entanglement with the Earth and their special place in it. Humankind cannot "abandon" its House, a place which it "created" and where it belongs. An empty house without inhabitants is a hollow shell, a haunted space, an object bound to wither and collapse in time. As Kolbert claims, at this point in history nature has been furnished, repainted and reconstructed by humans so extensively, that it no longer can be abandoned by him. In consistence with the current ecological findings, humans need to remain the Inhabitants of the Earth to uphold its fragile ecosystems already irrevocably tampered with. Romantics believed that humans lost psychological harmony due to their lack of intimacy with nature (Goodbody 2013: 63). *Piranesi* shows that humans also need to combat their alienation from nature and think of themselves as Inhabitants and a Children of the Earth in order to build their own well-being resulting from the sense of belonging.

On the other hand, the metaphor of Earth as a house and Piranesi's insistence that the World requires human presence evokes associations with the biblical story of creation, where God creates earthly Paradise as a place for humans to live and thrive. Adam is brought to life by God on the last day of creation as its capstone. One of his occupations is naming every creature living in the Paradise, which is mirrored by Piranesi, who attempts to chart all the tides and name all the statues of his reality. Piranesi's solitude in the House is an echo of Adam's initial isolation in the confined space of Eden. Both are pure of heart and easy to manipulate by the forces of evil – the Devil/Ketterley. Both communicate spontaneously with

a divine force –Adam speaks with God, Piranesi talks with the House. Both lose their innocence and as a result gain more informed understanding of the reality, in which they used to live. Also, both Adam and Piranesi long for their initial state of innocence and happiness, and if it were possible, would gladly return to Eden/the House. Most importantly, both are indispensable elements of the world to which they belong. The House needs an admirer, a recipient and a child to take care of; Eden with all its creatures was created as a habitat for humans and can perform no higher function than to serve them. Therefore, The House may be interpreted as a vision of God immanent in His creation, whose love for humans makes Him miss their attention and desire their reciprocal love with holy jealousy. The House, like the God of the Old Testament, speaks to his chosen one and wants to bind him with goodness and mercy, yet allows Piranesi to leave when he makes that decision, respecting his free will.

5. The House as heterotopia

The above discussion has dealt with the House as a space used in *Piranesi* to explore human relationship with the world in the primary reality. However, an analysis of the House in relation to the frame world presented in the novel, the ordinary human world, reveals how the House serves also as a heterotopia, a place within a place, inverting the set of relations that it mirrors, and contesting the reality which it represents (Foucault 1986: 24).

In accordance with Foucault's division, Piranesi's world is a heterotopia of deviation, which is a place which shelters humans displaying atypical behaviours. The amnesia that it causes forces Piranesi to return to the state of Original Participation, where he ascribes intention, will, and intelligence to the material world. This attitude is believed to be deviant and unacceptable attitude in the primary world, which takes a utilitarian approach to nature. Moreover, the House attracts people who do not fit in well with society like Raphael, who finds constant human company tiresome (227). Secondly, true to the third principle of heterotopias set out by Foucault, the House "juxtaposes in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1986: 25). It represents, as described above, domestic space and wilderness, culture and nature, the metaphysical and the physical. Therefore, The House's contradictoriness contests the clear ontological and conceptual divisions operational in the primary reality, which result in modern people's alienation from nature. Furthermore, the House is a heterotopia "linked to the accumulation of time" and "oriented toward

the eternal" (1986: 25), where the statues represent the Platonic ideas and the hero, despite his best efforts, is lost in his reckoning of time. The statues' metaphysical existence out of time is contrasted in the House with the internal patterns of change in the form of the waves or the seasons (suggesting the existence of time as motion in Aristotelian philosophy). As a portal fantasy *Piranesi* also fits in with the fifth principle of heterotopia, which is its compulsory or restricted access requiring the use of rituals, or permission. Only a few people are able to enter the House strictly following the instructions restricted to the followers of Arne-Sayles. Also, Foucault's system specifies the House as a heterotopia of compensation since it is a "space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (1986: 27). The House's perfection is not grounded in its aesthetical values; rather, the beauty of that world lies in the unchecked and surprising creativity of the forces of nature, as well as in the order of the mind that it produces in certain individuals. It is also perfect in the solitude and tranquillity it offers, something lacking in the novel's frame world characterized by its multitude of people, suffering, as well as chaos, and rivalry.

Conclusions

Piranesi offers us "environmental counterethics" (Manes 1996: 16) necessary in times of crisis resulting from the modern utilitarian approach to nature. In particular, it presents a picture of a man so interrelated with the fantastic world that he inhabits, that that world becomes a part of him, alive and articulate. His House is a heterotopia of the frame world, the ordinary world of modern people, offering a means of escape from the pervasively negative patterns of human interactions with the environment and modern people's lack of bond with the space inhabited by them resulting in their alienation from it. *Piranesi* encourages breaking the vicious circle of indifference and destruction as well as seeking means of connection with nature. It also teaches that animism does not need to be sentimental make-believe but a powerful mental practice potentially promising tangible "consequences in the realm of societal practices" (Manes 1996: 15). These consequences may include not only increased ecological awareness and sensitivity to the effects of human interferences with nature but also a stable sense of identity and belonging based on realization of the mutuality of nature-human relationship. Within the logic of the novel the first obstacle to the moral treatment of the Earth is the dismantling of nature's cultural silence. This is necessary since "for human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another" (Manes 1996: 16).

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InScriptum

BOOK REVIEWS

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Ana I. Simón Alegre, *Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer (1850-1919). Cartas, cuentos cortos y artículos periodísticos*, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2023, 281 pp.

(Revisado por Marta B. Ferrari, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata)

A poco más de cien años de su muerte, podríamos decir que la recuperación de la figura de Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer (Teruel, 1850 – Buenos Aires, 1919) es relativamente reciente. Desde hace aproximadamente unos 25 años esta escritora aragonesa ha comenzado a recibir toda la atención crítica que su personalidad y su obra se merecen. Paradójicamente, para muchos de sus contemporáneos el nombre de esta polifacética escritora no era el de una desconocida. Ya en 1881 Diego Ignacio Parada la incluía en su Manual *Escritoras y eruditas españolas*, al tiempo que dejaba constancia de que su nombre era "harto conocido", su "ingenio superior" y su "reputación merecida". Poco después, en 1889 el excepcional libro de Juan Pedro Criado y Domínguez titulado *Literatas españolas del siglo XIX: apuntes bibliográficos*, uno de los primeros intentos de ofrecer una verdadera historia intelectual femenina, con su aparato crítico y su apéndice biográfico y contextual, recogía su nombre entre las periodistas. Y en ese mismo año, Manuel Ossorio y Bernard publicaba en la revista madrileña *La España Moderna*, un minucioso *Diccionario biográfico de escritoras españolas del siglo XIX* en el que también dedicaba una entrada a "Gimeno de Flaquer (Doña María de la Concepción)", subrayando un dato muy singular, su faceta como empresaria, al ser la fundadora, propietaria y directora de *La Ilustración de la mujer* (1872). Igualmente relevante es el poema que, por estos mismo años, le dedica Rubén Darío titulado "A Concepción Gimeno", un testimonio indiscutible del renombre intelectual de la escritora española: "Todos los que te cantan/ en armoniosos versos,/te llaman perla, Concha,/del Océano inmenso…/Tú eres astro… y no dejas/de ser perla y lucero,/escritora inspirada,/que del mar de los cielos/en las ondas azules/derramas mil destellos".

Efectivamente, María de la Concepción Gimeno, egresada de la Escuela de Maestras de Zaragoza, fue periodista, ensayista, cuentista, poeta, biógrafa

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y novelista. Pero su vasta obra está atravesada por una cuestión dominante: la cuestión femenina, sin dudas, la preocupación central de la escritora. Entre sus diecisiete ensayos, destacan *La mujer española. Estudios acerca de su educación y de sus facultades intelectuales* (1877), *La mujer juzgada por una mujer* (1887), *En el salón y en el tocador: vida social, cortesía, arte de ser agradable, belleza moral y física, elegancia y coquetería* (1899) y *La mujer intelectual* (1901). Cito un solo ejemplo procedente del primero de estos libros, su texto "La literata en España", en el que realiza un diagnóstico que será, a la vez, el motor de su activismo en favor de la causa femenina: "Una mujer está autorizada para consagrar horas á la atención de sermones insustanciales de sacerdotes ignorantes, y la mayor parte del tiempo á la toilette, y no está autorizada para consagrar una hora diaria al estudio" (1877: 212). Más allá de lo provocador que resulta dicho diagnóstico puesto en boca de una moderada feminista católica como Gimeno, lo original de su ensayo es la contextualización histórica y geográfica que da a su escrito puesto que en él hablará de la literata no en términos generales y abstractos, sino atendiendo a la particular circunstancia que debe atravesar la mujer escritora en la España del XIX.

Este aspecto central de su obra ha sido parcialmente abordado por algunos acercamientos críticos como los pioneros de Maryellen Bieder en la década de los ´90, o los de Marina Bianchi, Margarita Pintos o Antonio Pedrós Gascón, más recientemente. En este sentido, el estudio de Ana Isabel Simón Alegre publicado en 2023 por Vernon Press y titulado *Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer (1850-1919). Cartas, cuentos cortos y artículos periodísticos* es un libro muy necesario que viene a completar con una mirada prismática, la imagen de la escritora aragonesa. La publicación de Simón Alegre, profesora de la Universidad de Adelphi (Nueva York), y especialista en estudios de género y estudios transatlánticos, significa un aporte indiscutible a los estudios de la escritura femenina en el siglo XIX español. Su libro rescata la figura de Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer y de su producción escrituraria desde múltiples perspectivas, tanto desde un ángulo histórico/cultural como literario/periodístico, pero también focalizando en su extraordinaria capacidad como gestora y mediadora cultural entre España e Hispanoamérica. El libro ofrece un enfoque original por su encuadre simultáneamente feminista y transatlantico y apunta, con argumentos razonados, a ampliar el canon de la literatura española de fines del siglo XIX y comienzos del XX.

El libro de Ana Simón Alegre, que cuenta con un prefacio a cargo de Lou Charnon-Deutsch (Stony Brook University) que historiza el surgimiento y afianzamiento del pensamiento feminista, se estructura en cinco capítulos. Uno

introductorio que aborda desde su biografía, pasando por las redes de sociabilidad en las que se inscribe, hasta llegar a su actividad como editora, periodista, pensadora y escritora. Un segundo capítulo dedicado a las notas y comentarios sobre la traducción del libro, espacio esclarecedor y necesario porque se trata de una edición simultáneamente en español y en inglés. El capítulo tercero reproduce las diez cartas enviadas por Concepción Gimeno al actor y empresario teatral español, Manuel Catalina, en el curso del año 1873, un corpus altamente revelador de la personalidad de la escritora. El cuarto capítulo es de gran relevancia porque incorpora siete cuentos breves compuestos entre 1879 y 1908, de muy difícil localización, acompañados aquí de un provechoso aparato crítico de notas. En el último, se reproduce una selección de diecisiete artículos periodísticos publicados entre 1877 y 1909, una selección guiada por criterios temáticos como el amor, el vínculo con México y sus mujeres, y la defensa de la causa feminista. La autora añade, además, una interesante galería de imágenes que incluye desde variados retratos de Concepción Gimeno a lo largo del tiempo, hasta cartas manuscritas, pasando por tarjetas de visita y dedicatorias, textualidades todas que aportan desde lo iconográfico, nuevos elementos de interpretación de la figura en estudio.

Más allá del indiscutible conocimiento del vasto corpus textual de la escritora en cuestión, la profusa y actualizada bibliografía crítica empleada da cuenta del profundo conocimiento de la autora respecto de su objeto. Se trata de una obra que implica un paciente y dilatado trabajo de archivo, documentación, reunión y transcripción de un material en gran medida disperso, a lo que se suma la dificultad que suponen las múltiples reescrituras a las que la propia Gimeno sometía sus escritos, un material no siempre de fácil acceso, más allá de los títulos digitalizados y de acceso abierto que tanto la Biblioteca Nacional de España como el Centro Cervantes ofrecen en sus respectivos sitios de internet. A esto se agrega el minucioso trabajo de edición, anotación, datación y comentario a cada uno de los textos que aquí se incluyen, en especial las cartas y los cuentos y su correspondiente aparato crítico. Otro aspecto a destacar es la sobria y cuidada edición del libro que se incluye en la serie de Estudios Literarios de Vernon Press.

En síntesis, se trata de un libro tan útil como necesario que sabrán agradecer y valorar quienes estén interesados en la literatura española en general, en su prolífico siglo XIX, y en la producción escrituraria femenina en particular, pero también los sociólogos de la literatura que encontrarán en sus páginas múltiples y relevantes claves del armado de redes culturales entre Europa y América. Si consideramos que, además, estamos ante un trabajo de traducción de todo este corpus al inglés, la contribución y originalidad del libro de Simón Alegre

me parece central puesto que nunca antes se había realizado una tarea de tan ambicioso aliento sobre la relevante producción de Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer, poniendo al alcance del lector hispano y angloparlante un material inédito o difícilmente accesible.

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Elizabeth Abel, Odd Affinities: *Virginia Woolf's Shadow Genealogies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024, xix + 289 pp.

(Reviewed by Luca Pinelli, Università degli Studi di Bergamo)

As early as 1920, Virginia Woolf complained in her essay "Freudian Fiction" that the emergence of psychoanalysis positively transformed the literary scene in Britain, as "the new key is a patent key that opens every door. It simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches" (1988: 197): far from simply providing another critical perspective from which to look at literature, Freud's theories threatened to reduce literary complexity to a list of symptoms any reader could venture to discern and analyse, Woolf suggested. Indeed, critics of Freud may feel inclined to argue that he often used literature to support his own theories without necessarily seeing any gaps between what he wanted to argue and the plethora of literary texts he scoured in search of a reflection of his own intuitions about human subjectivity, death, mourning, mothers and fathers. This is clearly *not* what happens in Elizabeth Abel's latest monograph, which compellingly argues for the significance and even the necessity to investigate Woolf's 'shadow genealogies' rather than simply content oneself with the wealth of direct or indirect citations her oeuvre has generated across the globe. If it is a shadow genealogy that *Odd Affinities* attempts to reconstruct, the less acknowledged shadow cast over its deft arguments is precisely Freudian psychoanalysis, which irrupts into the text, curiously enough, precisely when we enter European territory.

Organised in two separate but clearly interlinked parts, the monograph offers an astute reading of the potential resonances between Woolf on the one hand and Nella Larsen, James Baldwin, Roland Barthes, and W.G. Sebald on the other. Far from simply providing a thematic reading of Woolf's and the other authors' texts, Elizabeth Abel demonstrates what a truly comparative work should look like: as she weaves in and out of the texts, she finds unlikely connections and surprising echoes, often even at the level of syntax and vocabulary. So for instance we find ourselves positively astonished to find *Mrs Dalloway*'s oft-cited beginning reworked into a subordinate clause in Larsen's *Passing* ("the morning's aimless

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wandering through the teeming Harlem streets, long after she had ordered the flowers which had been her excuse for setting out, was but another effort to tear herself loose", quoted in Abel 2024: 25) or Woolf's "damned egotistical self" as something she needs to downplay and counteract in her writing echoed in Baldwin's "prison of my egocentricity" (quoted in Abel 2024: 70). But the monograph goes further, showing how the almost implausible resonances we can find between Woolf and other writers not traditionally associated with her – and who were often far from seeing her as part of their canon or even their literary conversation – reveal the underside of the 'hypercanonic' Woolf, to borrow David Damrosch's useful concept (cf. Damrosch 2006).

The second part explores a more European context than the first, devoted as the latter was to an exploration of these unobserved vibrations occurring between African American authors and Woolf's glaringly white modernism. Barthes' work on photography and mourning clearly calls for a solid grounding in psychoanalytic theory, and Abel, whose first monograph famously pioneered psychoanalytic readings of Woolf, happily produces her sophisticated understanding of Freud, Melanie Klein, and Nicholas Abraham. I am using 'sophisticated' not merely because of the sheer pleasure Abel's writing generates in somebody well versed in literary (and possibly psychoanalytic) criticism, but first and foremost because, as Woolf presaged in 1920, psychoanalysis can often reduce texts (and authors and characters) to symptoms we should dissect and resolve rather than see them as complexly stratified repositories of fact and fiction, presence and absence. Even in the most densely psychoanalytic chapter – Chapter 3 on Barthes, Woolf, and maternal mourning – Abel steers clear of this risk by drawing attention to the gaps in psychoanalytic theory that open up precisely once it is juxtaposed to literature, concluding for instance that 'mania' "offers a way to bridge the language of classical psychoanalysis with an emergent discourse of affects and sensations that deflects the critique of mania as a fantasy of omnipotence masking a failure to symbolize" (2024: 165-6): if tradition provides you with answers that hit the mark a bit too low, these theories ought to be corrected, redirected, placed in dialogue with the literary objects that could more pertinently provide a counterpoint. Perhaps slightly unacknowledged as a critical 'school' in the monograph, psychoanalysis is nonetheless never elevated to the status of a teller of literary truth but rather subjected to critical scrutiny.

That this is the only critical note we may venture to produce speaks volumes about the quality of the research this monograph rests upon. If Chapter 3 may find the reader somewhat underprepared for the dense psychoanalytic theorisation it

is premised upon, the other three chapters often struck me because of the skilful interweaving between the texts and authors they were to investigate. In good comparative fashion, *Odd Affinities* manages to bring into the same figurative room different authors and texts in order to fully explore their sonorities not only beyond received ideas but primarily beyond the kind of linear reception that literary criticism still cannot do without. And here comes Abel, pointing to the unobserved shadows that move at our feet as we move the light hither and thither in search of moths to taxonomise: making room for Woolf beyond her female genealogy or her feminist legacy helps us to better understand her significance not only as a well acknowledged presence in the literary canon, but first and foremost as a flickering light that produces shadows we need to follow and vibrations that we need to attend to.

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Javier Marías, *Tu rostro mañana*, Madrid: Alfaguara, 2023, 768 pp.

(Reseñado por José de María Romero Barea, I.E.S. Azahar, Sevilla)

Javier Marías y las intrusiones de la realidad

Ahora que vivimos encapsulados en la cárcel dorada de nuestras absoluciones, engañados por máquinas superinteligentes que nos hacen creer que una simulación computarizada es la realidad, regresa el maestro de la fábula como modelo de investigación solipsista. Dos años después de su fallecimiento, revive Javier Marías (Madrid, 1951-2022) a través de su indagación ilustrada del cosmos que se abre dentro de uno mismo, cuando cada acto irreflexivo nos golpea. ¿Cómo perdonamos, nos curamos, nos damos espacio para respirar, para seguir adelante?

Es *Tu rostro mañana* –oportunamente reeditada por Alfaguara en 2023– una trilogía que no sólo trata de la necesidad, sino también de la imposibilidad de obtener consuelo de la literatura. Quince años después de haber sido publicada en tres entregas –*Fiebre y lanza*, 2002; *Baile y sueño*, 2004; *Veneno y sombra y adiós*, 2007–, la saga sigue desafiando todas las versiones de la historia oficial que nos contamos, mientras emite su doloroso recordatorio de que nada tiene por qué suceder como acaba sucediendo.

Contradice así el Premio Nelly Sachs 1997 el prejuicio categorial del filósofo Descartes, que promulga que apenas somos cerebros aislados en categorías: ser significa hacer, más que pensar. Escribir es asistir a una representación del pensamiento ético, teniendo en cuenta la dificultad innata de separar la filosofía racional de la vida misma, de leer explotando ingeniosamente el potencial simbólico del texto, dejando que el lector separe los numerosos subtextos de las pistas falsas.

Para Javier Marías, redactar significa, en última instancia, actuar, trascender la *res cogitans* o cosa pensante. La frecuentación de su mejor literatura nos convierte en sujetos activos contra las limitaciones; seres finitos, que, paradójicamente, tenemos al infinito, mientras resonamos en el texto que nos garabatea, un entramado ideológico en el que las intrusiones de la realidad cuestionan las creencias filosóficas y éticas de una narrativa que es difícil dejar de leer.

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Nadie debería jamás contar nada

Nos sentamos frente a la pantalla para asistir a una transmisión en vivo de actores que interpretan escenas: «Deberíamos estar acostumbrados a la naturaleza temporal de las cosas, pero no lo estamos. Insistimos en no ser temporales, por eso es tan fácil asustarnos». Se narra desde una sensibilidad difícil de definir o ubicar, desde una distancia que parece a la vez alienada e íntima.

Las escenas cambian vagamente unas sobre otras, los personajes aparecen y desaparecen, con el efecto de algo no contado del todo, pero sí plenamente presente; no del todo visible, pero dotado de un encantamiento problemático. El autor edita el metraje –con efectos espaciales– en un largometraje escrito –o una obra de teatro filmada– mientras la cámara nos acecha, furtiva.

Nos recrea el artilugio de papel resultante a partir de su compendio de experiencias ajenas. El que lee, ¿es una réplica de sí mismo o del creador?: «Nadie debería jamás contar nada», asevera el narrador, «ni dar datos o aportar historias, ni hacer recordar a seres que nunca existieron cuando pisaron la tierra o cruzaron el mundo, que sólo sucedieron, pero estaban medio a salvo en la oscuridad y en el olvido».

Momentos de creación conducen a instancias iletradas donde los conceptos quedan incorporados a la inmaterialidad de lo escrito, como secuencias que nos mostraran lo que percibimos, pero reescritas por estados de lucidez que encapsulan lo que conocemos, mundos dentro de otros mundos, entelequias que hasta entonces creíamos imposibles de urdir.

Se nos presenta un ensayo sobre ética escrito por un novelista, una invención basada en hechos verosímiles, porque «contar siempre es un placer, incluso cuando toma e inyecta veneno en la vena, porque también supone un vínculo que aporta confianza, y rara es la confianza que antes de perderse no se traiciona, raro el vínculo que no se enreda o se regala, y terminas intentando cortarlo sacando el filo de la navaja».

Los detalles que aporta el protagonista, Jacques o Jaime o Jacobo Deza, se ajustan a la fisonomía de quienes le rodean, pero el interlocutor se permite un margen de duda para imaginar esas realidades desde su propio interior, como si articulara el equivalente literario de un tratado de biología, con genes que se transmiten, mutan aleatoriamente o sufren selección natural, explicaciones pseudocientíficas estas que nunca logran explicar del todo la experiencia humana.

Si el poeta inglés William Blake fue capaz de concebir el universo en un grano de arena, el Premio Comunidad de Madrid 1998 nos descubre las galaxias de

significados que encierra toda falacia: «¿Hasta qué punto eres capaz de dejar de lado los principios? […] Todos lo hacemos de vez en cuando, de lo contrario no podríamos sobrevivir: por conveniencia, por miedo, por necesidad. Por sacrificio, por generosidad. Por amor, por odio».

El resultado contiene una deliberación profunda y sostenida sobre cuestiones de identidad, autoría, arte y ética. Detrás de la meticulosa transcripción de los fenómenos consuetudinarios que lleva a cabo el descreído avatar, respira una fe latente –la de un místico– en que todo, por cotidiano que parezca, contiene secretos a la espera de ser desvelados.

Una actuación continuada

La ficción primordial, cruzada de ficciones adyacentes, ejerce un poder correctivo contra el enfoque primigenio de que la ignorancia es felicidad: «Tendemos a pensar que hay un orden oculto que desconocemos y también una trama de la que querríamos ser parte consciente». Al insistir en el velo que nos separa de la verdad, las derivas intergeneracionales derriban prejuicios: no es aquí donde estamos, no somos quienes seguimos leyendo, trascendiendo límites, anulando las insuficiencias «del método –saber que existe, o se le atribuye–, de modo que cualquiera pierde su bendito rumbo variable, impredecible, incierto, y con ello su libertad».

Avanza la incredulidad hacia el materialismo letrado en diálogos que todo lo cuestionan. Seres sensibles, conscientes y comunicantes, se niegan a dejarse asustar por lenguajes secretos, códigos abstrusos, extrañas formas de cognición, empeñadas en «creer que el significado de algo, aunque sea el más mínimo detalle, depende de nosotros o de nuestras acciones, de nuestro propósito o de nuestra función, de creer que hay voluntad, que hay destino, e incluso una combinación de ambos».

La historia principal refuta las tramas secundarias que solemos contarnos, eso que denominamos experiencia, donde «no hay luz, ni espacio para respirar, ni ventilación en la unanimidad, ni en los lugares comunes compartidos. Hay que escapar de eso para poder vivir». Leemos refutando nuestra lectura a medida que procesamos los datos en una entidad física, ese libro abstracto, capaz de dar y recibir argumentos fantasmagóricos, un objeto etéreo que aceptamos «sin sentirnos atrapados en el tiempo en que nacimos y en el que moriremos».

Es posible contemplar la bibliografía del Premio Grinzane Cavour y Alberto Moravia 2000 como el exorcismo de ese espíritu llamado ser humano, tan parecido a un autómata «que se ve a sí mismo actuando, como si estuviera en

una actuación continuada». Se desentrañan ideas complejas en oraciones que nos impulsan hacia pasajes febriles, donde la inteligencia sucumbe a la enajenación, atormentada por espectros: «¿Quién cree que el exterior solo existe en la medida en que cuenta y los acontecimientos solo en la medida en que cuentan algo, aunque sea muy poco probable que alguien se moleste en contarlos, o en contar esos hechos concretos, es decir, los hechos básicos?».

Todo baila con nosotros hasta el final de los días

Experimentos mentales para explorar los límites de lo que significa estar vivo transcriben reminiscencias de nuestro momento transhumanista, con tecnofuturistas entelequias siempre a una distancia práctica de la espiritualidad, entes entre los cuales «vivimos, supongo que con la esperanza inconfesada de que algún día se romperán las reglas, el curso, la costumbre y la historia, y de que, según nuestra experiencia, seremos nosotros, es decir, yo».

Son los antepasados quienes entregan las revelaciones prelapsarias: su cometido es pergeñar una visión de la actualidad como un más allá imperceptible o indiferente a lo que percibimos a través de los sentidos, lo que «pasa [en definitiva] con lo que negamos o callamos, lo que guardamos y enterramos: desaparece sin remedio y llegamos a no creer que realmente existió o si existió, tendemos a desconfiar increíblemente de nuestras percepciones cuando ya son pasadas y no son confirmadas».

Una vez desechado el afán mecanicista de la intangibilidad que sobrevive a la anulación corporal, lo que queda del modelo cartesiano de la relación mente-cuerpo implica, necesariamente, la redacción cerebral que, indefectiblemente, observa los datos sensoriales proyectados en el relato sobre la búsqueda de una identidad personal y política contada en varias voces.

Se despliega un *tour de force* de múltiples narrativas, una habitación ficticia con muchos habitantes, angustias y discusiones: una obra desafiante y ambiciosa que rehace la idea de la ficción y sus usos: «Negamos nuestra memoria y terminamos contándonos versiones inexactas de lo que presenciamos, no confiamos en los testigos ni en nosotros mismos, lo sometemos todo a la hora de las traducciones».

Evoca el Premio Alessio las bellezas del mundo natural al tiempo que los hedores de la podredumbre especulativa en el túmulo mortuorio de la costumbre, mediante un discurso que flota al borde de la locura, explorando la idea de que un escritor que crea una narrativa unificada traiciona la verdad de una existencia en la que «nos entregamos a la interpretación perpetua, incluso de lo que conocemos

y sabemos con seguridad, y así lo hacemos flotar inestable, impreciso, porque nada es nunca fijo ni definitivo, y todo baila con nosotros hasta el final de los días».

Se explora toda una trayectoria literaria, política, emocional y existencial. Insiste el Premio José Donoso 2008 en la certeza de que, libro adentro, no hay página, ni hay pantalla, ni ego que proyectar en ella: más bien, son nuestros cerebros la maquinaria que procesa la información, mientras que el yo es una entidad ilocalizable, porque «no soportamos las certezas, ni siquiera las que nos convienen y consuelan […] nadie quiere convertirse en eso, en su propio dolor y su fiebre y su lanza».

Se compromete *Tu rostro mañana* con los problemas y ansiedades de su tiempo y, de paso, del nuestro. Es el paso del tiempo, en definitiva, la que nos empuja a sanar la herida que nos inflige el hecho de sabernos mortales, lo que ilumina, en definitiva, nuestro camino hacia la trascendencia. Son estos tres volúmenes del America Award 2010 un artilugio esencial, rebosante de prolijos debates existenciales que se deleitan, sobre todo, en los silencios que fomentan. Porque si uno ama, parece sugerir el Premio de Literatura Europea austriaco de 2011, es posible que se quede sin palabras.

El rostro bajo la máscara

Sostienen los personajes, tan quiméricos como incorpóreos, que es posible la conciencia, pero dependiente de la conducta y sus predisposiciones. Aunque diferentes, forman parte de una misma ficción: «¿Cómo no conocer hoy tu rostro mañana, el rostro que ya está ahí o se está forjando bajo el rostro que muestras o bajo la máscara que llevas puesta, y que sólo me mostrarás cuando menos lo esté esperando?». La intención cosmológica de *Tu rostro mañana* parece ser cuestionar el lugar de la humanidad en la naturaleza, o lo que es lo mismo, su misión en el planeta Tierra.

Comparte el Premio Formentor 2013 su habilidad para reanimar lo sucedido en de manera cognoscible para los demás, sin dejar de ser fiel a sí mismo. Su obra es difícil de definir: una mezcla de realismo, memorial y polémica. Aunque se resiste a los binarios de culpable e inocente, víctima o perpetrador, uno no puede evitar compartir esa mezcla de simpatía y repulsión que nos provoca a medida que conocemos la peripecia del Premio Bottari Lattes Grinzane 2015, basada en explorar cómo hombres y mujeres se proponen desatar la mentira de sí mismos con consecuencias devastadoras para su alteridad.

Transcurridos dos años de su desaparición, regresa Javier Marías, Premio Liber a toda su trayectoria en 2017, con este volumen esencial, al igual que las cuestiones que plantea, poblado de entes fascinados por deshacer los estragos de la muerte. Pero quizás su innovación más procedente sea resucitar una forma latente, la novela de ideas, que permite al que fuera miembro de la Real Academia Española y de la británica Royal Society of Literature vincular las más diversas tradiciones para encontrar el infinito no en un dios etéreo, sino en aquello que somos capaces de percibir a través de los sentidos: el amor, o su reconstrucción en una recreación omnicomprensiva.

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