InScriptum
A Journal of Language and Literary Studies

Volume 6/2025

InScriptum

A Journal of Language
and Literary Studies

InScriptum

A Journal of Language and Literary Studies

Volume 6/2025

InScriptum

ARTICLES

ALESSANDRA GOGGIO

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

Die Gefahren einer „ästhetischen" Erziehung: Zu Karl Gutzkows Roman *Wally, die Zweiflerin*

The Dangers of an "Aesthetic" Education: On Karl Gutzkow's Novel
Wally, die Zweiflerin

Abstract

Der Beitrag deutet Karl Gutzkows Roman *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (1835) als kritische Reflexion, welche durch literarische Mittel die Gefahren einer von überholten literarischen Idealen geprägten „ästhetischen" Bildung beleuchtet. Der Roman, oft als skandalöses und ästhetisch schwaches Werk abgetan, wird hier neu bewertet als ein komplexer, experimenteller Text, der das Erbe der klassisch-romantischen Literatur kritisch hinterfragt. Anhand einer detaillierten Analyse von Wallys Verwandlung von einer natürlichen, unabhängigen Frau zu einer tragischen Figur, die von literarischen Illusionen geformt wird, zeigt die Studie, wie Gutzkow die zerstörerische Macht idealistischer Literaturmodelle entlarven will. Die fragmentarische Struktur des Romans und seine verflochtenen Nebenhandlungen dienen daher nicht nur als erzählerisches Mittel, sondern als performative Kritik am Versagen der ‚klassisch-romantischen' Literatur, sich mit den sozialen Realitäten der Gegenwart auseinanderzusetzen. Letztlich erscheint Wally als ein Übergangswerk, das die ästhetischen Traditionen der Vergangenheit verwirft und zugleich auf eine stärker gesellschaftlich engagierte und realistische Literatur verweist.

Schlüsselwörter: ästhetische Erziehung, literarische (Selbst-)Inszenierung, Romantik-Rezeption, Vormärz

Abstract

This paper explores Karl Gutzkow's novel *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (1835) as a critical reflection through literary means on the dangers of an 'aesthetic' education shaped by outdated literary ideals. Often dismissed as a scandalous and aesthetically weak work, the novel is re-evaluated here as a complex, experimental text that critiques the legacy of classical-romantic literature. Through a detailed analysis of Wally's transformation – from a natural, independent woman into a tragic figure shaped by literary illusions – the study reveals how Gutzkow aims to expose the destructive power of idealistic literary models. Hence the novel's fragmented structure

and interwoven subplots serve not merely as narrative devices but as performative critiques of literature's failure to engage with contemporary social realities. Ultimately, Wally emerges as a transitional work that denounces the aesthetic traditions of the past while gesturing toward a more socially engaged and realistic literature.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic education, literary (self-)staging, reception of Romanticism, *Vormärz*

1. Zur Einführung: *Wally* – nur ein Skandalroman?

Karl Gutzkows Roman *Wally, die Zweiflerin* wird in Literaturgeschichten und -kursen fast immer lediglich als *der* Roman erwähnt, der 1835 das sogenannte Jungdeutschen-Verbot auslöste und eine hitzige Debatte unter Literaturkritikern und -schaffenden entfachte[1]. Man gewinnt fast den Eindruck, dieses Werk wäre längst vergessen und fände kaum noch Beachtung, wären diese außerliterarischen Umstände nicht gegeben. Hinzu kommt, dass dem Roman schon zur Zeit seiner Erscheinung mangelnde literarische Qualität vorgeworfen wurde. Stellvertretend sei hier an das Urteil von Gutzkows jungdeutschem Kollegen Theodor Mundt erinnert, der ihn als einen „unheimliche[n] und verwirrende[n] Regenschauer" mit „ungemein frostig[en] und künstlich zusammengeflickt[en]" Charakteren ohne „wirkliches Leben und inneres Bewegen" bezeichnete (Gutzkow 1998: 303). Ein ziemlich vernichtendes Urteil, das im 20. Jahrhundert kaum abgemildert wurde, wie die folgende exemplarische Auswahl an Stimmen zum Roman verdeutlicht: Bei *Wally* handele es sich halt um ein „ästhetisch schwaches und inhaltlich provozierendes Werk" (Sengle 1971: 176), eine „langweilige Lektüre" (Wegener 1977: 51), ein „buntes Gemenge", das jedoch „nicht zu einer Einheit verschmolzen wird" (Höllerer 1958: 149) – kurz gesagt: um ein epigonales Produkt seiner „zerrissenen" Zeit. In der Tat entspricht die narrative Struktur des Romans mit seinen zahlreichen Nebenhandlungen, Abschweifungen und Gattungsüberschreitungen weder der kompositionellen Ausgewogenheit und Kontingenz (trotz unterschiedlicher Materialien und Stilarten) der goetheschen *Wanderjahre* noch der erquickenden Frische einer frühromantischen Arabeske à la *Lucinde*. Vielmehr erscheint der Text als unübersichtlich und teilweise befremdlich, als ob die „epochale Zerrissenheit der Figuren auf die formale Heterogenität und inhaltliche Inkonsistenz des Romans" (Woywode 2019: 251) (un)absichtlich übertragen worden wäre, wobei eine solche Inkonsistenz lediglich als „Symptom einer übermächtigen Tradition und zugleich der Schwierigkeiten, denen sich die neue Lite-

---

[1]   Siehe hierzu die Dokumentation in Gutzkow 1998 und Wabnegger 1987.

ratur in ihrem Ablösungsprozess von den goethezeitlichen Vorbildern ausgesetzt sah" (Heintz 1998: 455) gedeutet wurde.

Nichtsdestoweniger darf *Wally, die Zweiflerin* als Experimentierfeld für einen neuen ‚anti-realistischen' (Zeller 1995: 208), jedoch nicht realitätsfernen Romantypus angesehen werden, der bereits einige Merkmale des Romans der Moderne (fragmentarische Struktur bzw. Montagetechnik) vorwegnimmt (Harrocks 2000: 152), ebenso wie für jenes transgenerische und ‚correlierende' Schreibverfahren Gutzkows (Vonhoff 2015), das erst einige Jahre später im ‚Roman des Nebeneinander' wirksam wird. Gerade aus diesem Grund sowie im Rahmen einer Neubewertung und De-Marginalisierung des Schriftstellers Gutzkow und seines Werkes wurde dieser Roman ab Anfang der 1990er Jahre erneut untersucht, und zwar aus einer Vielzahl von Perspektiven, die über die bereits erwähnten soziopolitischen Gründe für dessen „Berühmtheit" hinausgehen und die nicht nur einzelne Partien des Textes in den Blick nehmen, sondern auch jenes „Beiwerk" – gemeint sind die vielen Nebenhandlungen und -szenen, die die Haupthandlung um Wally und Cäsar ergänzen (Dobert 1968: 83) –, das in der Tat als „Kontrastive dazu [dient], das gerade Dargestellte zu präzisieren, historisch einzuordnen oder auch kritisch zu beleuchten" (Vonhoff 2001: 19). Unsere Interpretation reiht sich ebenfalls in ebensolche jüngeren Versuche ein, den Roman in seiner Ganzheit und eher aus einem literaturwissenschaftlichen bzw. -geschichtlichen als aus einem soziologischen oder soziopolitischen Blickwinkel zu betrachten. Insbesondere wird gezeigt, wie die verschiedenen ‚zerrissenen' Teile des Romans ein – nur auf den ersten Blick chaotisches – Nebeneinander von (Re-)Inszenierungen literarischer Vorbilder erzeugen, welche die Unangemessenheit und Unzulänglichkeit der deutsch-idealistischen literarischen Tradition, insbesondere der Romantik, zur Darstellung der Realität der Epoche nach der Restauration exponieren und Wally, aber eigentlich auch Cäsar, als Opfer einer ‚falschen' – weil realitäts- und gesellschaftsfremden – literarischen Sozialisation bzw. ‚ästhetischen' Erziehung entlarven. Unter diesem Aspekt erscheint *Wally, die Zweiflerin* als ein Roman, der nicht nur die „Pathologie der Gesellschaft" (Löwenthal 1981: 327) abbildet, sondern auch eine performative ‚Pathografie' der zeitgenössischen Literatur präsentiert, die sowohl als Wegbereiter als auch als fiktionales Pendant zu den im darauffolgenden Jahr veröffentlichten *Beiträgen zur Geschichte der neuesten Literatur* fungiert und über die Literatur der sogenannten Kunstperiode das Todesurteil verhängt.

Im Folgenden wird daher zunächst versucht zu verdeutlichen, wie die zahlreichen ‚Literaturinszenierungen', die sowohl in die Haupt- als auch in die Nebenhandlungen einmontiert sind, unterschiedliche Stufen einer ‚ästhetischen

Erziehung' verkörpern, die Wally allmählich aus dem wahren Leben in das Reich des Scheins und der Täuschung verbannt und schließlich zum Selbstmord treibt. Diese Untersuchung erfolgt in Form eines Close Readings des Textes, wobei die einzelnen Szenen aus dem Handlungszusammenhang herausgelöst und einzeln analysiert werden, und zwar sowohl in Bezug auf ihre inszenatorische Qualität als auch auf ihre (literatur-)kritische Funktion. Daran anschließend werden dann einige Überlegungen zum impliziten poetologischen Gehalt des Romans angestellt.

2. Wallys ,ästhetische' Erziehung: vom Naturmensch zur literarischen Figur

Es mag zunächst hilfreich sein, die Handlung des Romans kurz zu skizzieren. Dies erweist sich als eine ziemlich leichte Aufgabe, reduziert man sie allein auf die Hauptfabel: Wally, eine junge Frau adliger Abstammung, lernt während eines Aufenthalts in Schwalbach, einem kleinen deutschen Kurort, den jungen Baron Cäsar kennen; die zwei nähern sich an und es kommt zunächst zu einem Liebesverhältnis, das durch Wallys plötzliche Heirat mit einem anderen Mann unterbrochen wird. Einige Zeit später treffen sich die beiden allerdings in Paris wieder, wo Wally inzwischen mit ihrem Mann lebt und von dessen Bruder Jeronimo umworben wird. Als Letzterer sich ihretwegen umbringt, flieht sie mit Cäsar nach Deutschland zurück. Die beiden leben für eine Weile glücklich miteinander, bis Wally an ihrem Glauben und an der Religion im Allgemeinen zu zweifeln beginnt und sich immer mehr in sich selbst zurückzieht. Kurz darauf trennt sich Cäsar von ihr und zieht mit Delphine, einer jüdischen Freundin Wallys, nach Heidelberg, von wo aus er seiner ehemaligen Geliebten eine Art Abhandlung über die Religion – die sogenannten *Geständnisse über Religion und Christentum* – schickt, welche die ,Zweiflerin' von ihren Unsicherheiten der Religion gegenüber befreien soll; allerdings erreicht die Schrift nicht die gewünschte Wirkung und Wally begeht Selbstmord.

Diese an sich eher triviale Handlung, die einige Anklänge an F. Schlegels *Lucinde* sowie vor allem an G. Sands *Lélia* aufweist (Schillemeit 2006: 492-493), wird in drei Bücher gegliedert. In den ersten zwei werden die Ereignisse von einer heterodiegetischen Erzählinstanz dargestellt bzw. inszeniert (und zwar im konkreten Sinne des Wortes), deren Perspektive überwiegend personal ist, also mit der der Protagonisten, insbesondere Cäsar, übereinstimmt, die Geschichte(n) jedoch häufig auktorial kommentiert und damit eine ironische Distanz zum Erzählten und zu den Figuren schafft (Herrmann 2011: 165). Im dritten Buch hingegen

tritt der Erzähler fast vollständig zurück, indem er Wallys Tagebücher und Cäsars Geständnisse lediglich einführt; erst gegen Ende meldet er sich wieder, dem fiktiven Herausgeber im *Werther* ähnlich, um Wallys Selbstmord zu schildern.

Wie bereits angedeutet wird die Hauptfabel von einer Vielzahl von Nebengeschichten begleitet, die entweder vom (personalen) Erzähler oder unmittelbar von den Figuren selbst – insbesondere von Cäsar – performativ erzählt werden. So wird der Roman zugleich zu einer ‚Metasammlung' von Novellen, Märchen, Schauergeschichten sowie imaginierten Bildern und inszenierten dramatischen Szenen, die auf verschiedenen literarischen Vorlagen beruhen. Obwohl vermutet wurde, Gutzkow habe einige dieser, ebenfalls separat veröffentlichten, Geschichten dem Roman lediglich beigefügt, um sie als ‚Köder' für ein breites Publikum zu verwenden (Heintz 1998: 458) bzw. um die obligatorische Länge von zwanzig Bogen zu erreichen, die vor einem möglichen Vorzensurverfahren schützte, besitzen sie dennoch eine „konzeptionelle Bedeutung" (Briese 1992: 433), denn einerseits „spiegeln [sie] den tödlichen Ausgang" der Hauptgeschichte wider (Kruse 1987: 47), andererseits, zumal sie inhaltlich zu bestimmten Ereignissen innerhalb der fiktionalen Wirklichkeit des Romans nahestehen und die beiden Protagonisten teilweise involvieren, tragen sie zu einer Verwischung der Grenzen zwischen Realität und Fiktion sowie zwischen konkretem Handeln und idealisierter (Re-) Inszenierung von Wirklichkeit bei. Damit wird nämlich das Ineinandergreifen von Literatur und ‚wahrem' Leben – ein zentrales Anliegen der Jungdeutschen zur Veränderung von Gesellschaft und Realität – von seiner negativen Kehrseite beleuchtet, und zwar indem die Gefahren einer Literatur herausgestellt werden, deren Inhalte weiterhin idealistisch und wirklichkeitsfern bleiben.

Bevor man diese Geschichten genauer betrachtet, sei kurz auf die Position dieser Einschübe und deren Rolle in der Strukturierung der Handlung hingewiesen. In den drei Büchern – die ja auch als Akte einer Tragödie gelesen werden könnten – kommen diese an strategischen Stellen vor, die die Intensität und den Ausmaß von Wallys Erziehung schon strukturell beleuchten. Insbesondere die ersten zwei Bücher zeigen eine fast symmetrische und aufsteigende Struktur, wobei einem ersten ‚glücklichen' Höhepunkt stets ein zweiter, tragischerer folgt. Diese Schwankungen desorientieren zugleich die Leser_innen, die – wie Wally – immer mehr verwirrt werden, sodass es am Ende – d. h. im dritten Buch – selbstverständlich erscheint, dass die Protagonistin an ihren Zweifeln untergehen muss. Das Publikum hingegen soll dank der Distanz, die durch die metaleptische Hinzufügung von Cäsars Geständnissen erzeugt wird, dazu aufgefordert werden, Wallys (und das eigene) Schicksal kritisch zu reflektieren.

Schon auf der ersten Seite des Romans (Gutzkow 1998: 5)[2] wird man mit einer Szene konfrontiert, die einen ausgesprochen ekphrastischen Charakter aufweist: Die schöne Wally, die „im sonnengolddurchwirkten Wald" auf ihrem „weißen Zelter" erscheint, wird derart beschrieben, dass sie einem künstlich-künstlerischen Konstrukt gleicht. Nicht ohne Grund ist gleich im ersten Satz von einem „Bild" die Rede und die Figur der Protagonistin wird mit klassischen („die Schönheit Aphrodites") und romantischen („romantische[r] Zauber") ikonografischen und literarischen Motiven ausgestattet. Diese Eröffnungsszene fungiert somit als Zitat (Kaiser 1983: 195) bzw. als Inszenierung eines imaginierten *tableau vivant*[3], das einem bildungsidealistischen und aus Bildern und Mustern der klassisch-romantischen Literatur gespeisten Wahrnehmungs- und Vorstellungsvermögen entspringt, das jedoch weder der fiktionalen noch der realen zeitgenössischen Wirklichkeit gerecht wird. Nicht zufällig wird schon zu Beginn angedeutet, das Bild sei „von kleinen Lichtritzen" durchzogen (W 5) – ein Motiv, das implizit die museale Überholtheit dieser Darstellungsweise kritisiert. Konnte damals eine solche „Secondhand-Romantik" (Götze 2006: 361) die „Aufforderung [des Erzählers bzw. Autors, A.G.] zur Distanzwahrung gegenüber der Figur" (Vonhoff 1994: 80) untergraben, so erscheint heute die Künstlichkeit einer solchen Darstellung hingegen offensichtlich. Wie Gutzkow selbst in seiner *Verteidigung gegen Menzel* in Bezug auf die vielkritisierte und als unmoralisch verurteilte *Sigune*-Szene zugibt, haben derartige Szenen „nur malerischen Wert" (Gutzkow 1998: 322)[4] und dürfen daher als Karikaturen einer literarisch geprägten Wirklichkeitswahrnehmung gelesen werden.

Durch diese erste ekphrastische Darstellung wird Wally also als „literarische Figur" (Herrmann 2011: 165), als Produkt einer Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung im luhmannschen Sinne eingeführt. Dabei übernimmt der Erzähler zunächst Cäsars Perspektive und gibt *dessen* von literarischen Vorbildern geprägte Wahrnehmung der Szene wieder, nur um sie wenig später kritisch-ironisch zu kommentieren, etwa als er den jungen Mann als „genialen Charakter[ ]" mit einem „ganzen Friedhof toter Gedanken, herrlicher Ideen […] hinter sich" bezeichnet und ihn zum Vertreter jener „[u]nglücklichen Jugend", der „das Feld der Tätig-

---

[2]   Im Folgenden im Text mit *W* und Seitenzahl angegeben.
[3]   Diese narrative Strategie entspricht nicht nur Heines Karikatur der „romantischen Manier" (vgl. Vonhoff 2001: 23), sondern ruft zugleich Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften* ins Gedächtnis – allerdings mit parodistischer Intention.
[4]   H.E.G. Paulus bezeichnete die Titurel-Episode bereits 1836 als ein „restauriertes, altes Künstlergemälde" (Paulus 1836: 72).

keit […] verschlossen" ist, macht (W 5-6). Obwohl Cäsar sich als entschiedener Gegner und Verächter der klassischen, insbesondere der romantischen Literatur profiliert (W 13-20), vermag er es dennoch nicht, die Wirklichkeit anders als durch literarische Muster und Modelle dieser Epoche zu erfassen und dementsprechend zu reproduzieren. „Warum ist Cäsar nicht Schriftsteller geworden?" (W 15), fragt der Erzähler ironisch und spielt damit auf seine ‚Begabung' an, die in Wahrheit ein Fluch ist, die umgebende Wirklichkeit nur noch als eine endlose Folge von „Romanepisode[n]" (W 69) wahrnehmen zu können. Infolge seiner (literarischen) Sozialisation ist er geradezu ‚gezwungen', Wally nicht als lebendiges Individuum zu behandeln, sondern als schablonenhaften „Gegenstand einer poetischen Darstellung" (W 60), als jene „Prinzessin im Walde" (W 7) aus einer alten Sage, in die er sich selbst hineinprojiziert.[5]

Als Cäsar jedoch bald erkennt, dass Wally nicht seinem Idealbild entspricht[6], beginnt er, sie zu „erziehen" – indem er einerseits ihr Geschichten erzählt, die Fiktionalisierungen realer Ereignisse sind, und andererseits ihre Treffen nach literarischen Vorbildern gestaltet. Diese ‚ästhetische' Erziehung beginnt nach einem Gewitter – eine klare Anspielung auf Goethes *Werther* –, als Cäsar Wally die Geschichte vom „tollen Bärbel" und seinem Liebhaber Waldemar erzählt, um „ihr die trübe Zeit zu verkürzen" (W 24). Da Wally jedoch gefühllos und kritisch auf die herzzerreißende Geschichte reagiert – sie beklagt sogar deren fehlende formale Geschlossenheit („»Oh, ich bitte Sie, erzählen Sie Geschichten, die sich runden und einen Schluß haben!«", W 26) – versucht Cäsar ihr Interesse mit einer weiteren Anekdote, der vom Trompeter und seiner Frau, zu wecken. Doch auch dieser schenkt Wally offenbar nur „oberflächliche Aufmerksamkeit" (W 29-30). Erst als Cäsar scherzhaft auf die angebliche reale Anwesenheit der Protagonistin

---

[5]   An einer anderen Stelle weist der Erzähler zudem darauf hin, dass „ihm [Cäsar, A.G.] jede Situation fatal [ist], in der er sich selbst nicht hätte beobachten können" (W 33) – eine Charakterisierung, die seine permanente Selbstinszenierung und Verdinglichung als Objekt zweiter Ordnung betont.

[6]   Wally zeigt sich der romantischen Literatur gegenüber zunehmend desinteressiert und kritisch: „»Diese guten Waldsänger«, sprach sie vor sich hin, »nehmen sich die Freiheit, sehr ennuyant zu sein. Wenn uns die Reime nicht in einer Art von melodischer Spannung hielten, die Monotonie der Gefühle und Anschauungen wäre tödlich.«" (W 9). Wally wird außerdem als konkret und realitätsbezogen charakterisiert: „Sie ist ohne Schwärmerei für die Natur, ohne Sinn für Blumen, welche sie zerkaut, wenn sie ihr in die Hand kommen. Sonne, Mond und Sterne gehen ihre Bahnen, ohne von Wally bemerkt zu werden. Jedermann wird bereit sein, sie gefühllos zu nennen, und ihr dennoch Unrecht tun. Wallys unaussprechlicher Reiz ist ihre Natürlichkeit. Sie gibt sich, wie sie ist, und hat die Tugend, alles beim rechten Namen zu nennen" (W 24).

in ihrer unmittelbaren Nähe hinweist, reagiert sie erschrocken (W 31). Dieser Moment markiert die erste Stufe von Wallys ‚Erziehung' und ihren Eintritt in die Welt der Fiktion bzw. in Cäsars imaginierte Welt: Erst indem er eine Brücke zwischen literarischer Fiktion und konkreter Realität schlägt, gelingt es ihm, Wallys Interesse zu wecken und sie – wenn auch unbewusst – in seine Inszenierung hineinzuziehen. Hierbei handelt es sich zugleich um eine Umkehrung der Rollenverteilung von Natalie und Wilhelm in Goethes *Wilhelm Meister*: Denn obwohl Wallys anfänglicher Auftritt an den der „Amazone" erinnert (Zeller 1995: 208), gelingt es ihr nicht, Cäsar aus seiner fiktionalen Selbstverstrickung und schauspielerischen Selbstinszenierung zu ‚retten' – vielmehr wird sie selbst von ihm in das Reich des schönen Scheins hineingezogen. Cäsar dient keineswegs Wallys Emanzipation. Im Gegenteil: Er zerstört ihre unbeschwerte und freie Natur und macht sie zu einer ‚reflektierten' Figur, die wie er ‚zerrissen' ist, weil sie die Grenzen zwischen Fiktion und Realität nicht mehr erkennen kann.

Da Cäsar schon seit seiner Kindheit in einer Art Traum[7] lebt – oder besser gesagt: sich selbst inszeniert –, stellt dieser Zustand für ihn keine besondere Herausforderung dar. Anders jedoch für Wally, die an diesem Erziehungsprozess zerbrechen wird. Dass Wally allmählich in ein Theaterspiel hineingezogen wird, in dem zunächst nur Cäsar Regie führt und zugleich Wally zur Schauspielkunst erzieht, zeigt sich exemplarisch in der Anmerkung des Erzählers, nachdem dieser die Geschichte vom Trompeter und seiner Frau erzählt hat: „Diese Szene war bald vergessen. […] Wenn es nicht Liebe war, die ihn trieb, so war es die Aufgabe […] Wally, diese Ungezähmte und Unbändige, überwunden zu haben." (W 31). Indem der Erzähler hier „auf das Theatralische aufmerksam macht" (Zeller 1995: 210), bereitet er zugleich die nächste Szene vor: Als Cäsar im Wald auf Wally trifft und sie sich zu einer nahegelegenen Lichtung begeben, kommt es zu einer physischen Annäherung. Diese Episode lässt sich als eine durchdachte „Kontrafaktur der klassischen Liebesszene" (Vonhoff 2001: 29) lesen, und zwar in doppelter Hinsicht. Cäsars „Humanitätsfrage", Wallys Wunsch, „statt eines Weibes Mensch zu sein", sowie die Verwendung des schillerschen Begriffs „Sternenzelt" (W 34-35) fungieren als Elemente einer „künstlich-kunstvollen Vermittlung" (Rippmann

---

7   Schon als Kind phantasiert Cäsar über sein Leben (und seinen Tod), als wäre es ein Roman: „Cäsar sagte mir oft, als Kind hab' er sich fortwährend damit geängstigt, daß er keines natürlichen Todes sterben würde. […] Er gestand mir mit eisigem Grauen, daß er oft stundenlang heimlich mit entblößtem Halse gesessen und sich in die Illusion des Schafotts hineingedacht habe, daß ihm die Tränen geflossen seien aus Verzweiflung, so sterben zu müssen." (W 100-101).

1987: 120), die bloß eine Inszenierung der *klassischen* Idee der Humanität ermöglicht, welche Cäsar nur erlaubt, sich Wally körperlich zu nähern. Zudem findet hier – noch vor der berühmten Titurel-Szene – eine ironische Reinszenierung einer weiteren bedeutenden Liebesszene der Literatur des *klassischen* Mittelalters statt: der Minnegrottenszene aus Gottfrieds *Tristan*[8]. Wie dort ist auch der „grüne[ ] Rasenplatz[ ]" (W 32), an dem sich Cäsar und Wally aufhalten, vom Rest der Gesellschaft abgeschirmt und wird somit zum vermeintlich gesellschaftsfreien Raum, in dem sie ihre Liebe fern von der sanktionierenden bürgerlichen Ordnung ausleben dürften (Hammer 2018: 427). Doch wie im mittelalterlichen Epos handelt es sich auch hier nur um eine scheinbare Flucht aus der Gesellschaft[9], da die Annäherung zwischen den beiden durch eine „bildungsbürgerlich motivierte Stilisierung der Liebe" (Vonhoff 1994: 89) erfolgt (bzw. nur erfolgen darf). Um ihre Leidenschaft gesellschaftlich legitimieren zu können, inszenieren sich beide nur als ‚Menschen' nach der Humanitätsauffassung der Weimarer Klassik bzw. als ‚edle Herzen' im mittelalterlich-klassischen Sinne (Mertens 1995: 50). Cäsars und Wallys Handlungen sind daher nicht authentisch, sondern reine Nachahmung und Reinszenierung literarischer Vorbilder, wie der Erzähler ironisch hervorhebt:

> Sehet da eine Szene, wie sie in alten Zeiten nicht vorkam! Hier ist Raffiniertes, Gemachtes, aus der Zerrissenheit unsrer Zeit Gebornes: und was ist die Wahrheit Romeos und Juliettens gegen diese Lüge! Was ist die egoistische Geschlechtsliebe gegen diesen Enthusiasmus der Ideen, der zwei Seelen in die unglücklichsten Verwechselungen werfen kann! […] Die Übereinkunft der Liebe zwischen Wally und Cäsar mußte ihren Verhältnissen ein neues Kolorit geben. Wir fürchten, daß die Farben allmählich erbleichen werden. Aber noch sind sie hell und frisch. (W 35)

Dieser trügerische Glückszustand währt jedoch nur kurz: Durch den Vorfall mit der Trompeterfrau muss Wally die Gefahren der Auflösung der Grenzen zwischen Realität und Fiktion am eigenen Leib erfahren. Einige Tage später, bei einem nächtlichen Spaziergang, beobachtet sie eine gespenstische „Szene", wie sie im Roman ausdrücklich genannt wird (W 45): Eine Frau irrt durch das Dorf, bleibt vor ihr stehen und vergräbt schließlich ihren Kopf im Sand. Am nächsten

---

[8]   Dass Gutzkow mit dem mittelalterlichen Epos bestens vertraut war, bezeugt nicht nur die Anwesenheit eines Exemplars des Textes in seiner Bibliothek (*Auctions-Katalog* 1879: 18), sondern auch die Tatsache, dass er einige Verse aus dem Epos als Motto für die 9. Ausgabe seines «Forum der Journal-Literatur» benutzte (Gutzkow 1831).

[9]   Wie V. Mertens anmerkt, bedeutet der Rückzug in die Minnegrotte „nicht Regression aus der höfischen Gesellschaft, sondern das glatte Gegenteil, die Vereinnahmung" (1995: 50).

Morgen erfährt Wally von Cäsar, dass „die Frau des Trompeters an der gespens-tischen Trommelmusik ihres Ohres diese Nacht gestorben sei. Sie sei […] in der Alleegefunden worden, wie sie mit dem Kopf in den Sand gewühlt dagelegen" (W 46). Erneut verwischt Cäsar die Grenze zwischen Fakten und Fiktion: Aller-dings scheint Wally plötzlich die Gefahren zu ahnen, die ihre Beziehung zu Cäsar verbirgt, und beschließt, den Kurort schnellstmöglich zu verlassen[10]. Mit diesem tragischen Schluss endet das erste Buch.

Der zweite Teil des Romans öffnet sich mit der plötzlichen Verlobung Wal-lys mit dem sardinischen Gesandten, jenem „praktische[n] Egoist[en]" (W 72), der im Roman den aufkommenden Materialismus und Kapitalismus verkörpert. Doch Cäsar ist nicht bereit, Wally loszulassen und verwickelt sie in zwei weitere miteinander verknüpfte Inszenierungen, um sie dauerhaft an sich zu binden. Die erste findet in Wallys Wohnung statt: Als Cäsar sie dort in einem „schwärmeri-sche[n] schwarzen Kleid" antrifft, verhält er sich wie ein empfindsamer Dramen-held: „Liebenswürdig war es von diesem grenzenlosen Leichtsinn, daß er Tränen am Auge hängen hatte. Cäsar schwamm in Entzücken. Er war auf eine *Komödie* gefaßt und fand *eine tragische Szene*, die ihn erschütterte." (W 51). Nicht zufällig ist auch diese Episode von Begriffen durchzogen, die auf ihre Theatralität hinwei-sen; dass es sich noch einmal um eine von Cäsar geführte Inszenierung handelt, wird überdies anhand eines Kommentars des Erzählers untermauert: „Alles üb-rige dichtete seine Phantasie hinzu" (Ebd.)[11]. Kurz darauf erzählt er ihr dann eine neue Geschichte, und zwar die Liebesgeschichte zwischen Tschionatulander und Sigune aus dem *Jüngeren Titurel*. Dabei versucht er, die berühmte Abschiedsszene zwischen den Liebenden, als der Held darum bittet, „daß Sigune – in vollkomme-ner Nacktheit zum vielleicht – ewigen Abschiede sich ihm zeigen möge" (W 52) zu seinem Vorteil auszunutzen und Wally dazu zu überreden, sich ihm nackt zu zeigen. Daraufhin verlässt Wally empört das Zimmer, was Cäsar dazu veranlasst, sie als ein Wesen „ohne Poesie" zu bezeichnen, das nicht nur ihn, sondern „die Poesie beleidigt hat" (W 53).

---

[10]   Wallys Begründung ihrer Entscheidung zur Abreise deutet die tragischen Folgen von Cäsars Einfluss bereits an: „ich bin eines Ortes müde, der mich umbringen muß." (W 46)

[11]   In diesem Fall scheint er sich an dem Modell von Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften* zu orientie-ren, denn Cäsar und Wally unterhalten sich über wissenschaftliche Themen (die „Erfindung des Schießpulvers, [das] Gesetz der Schwere, [den] Kompaß und [die] Magnetnadel", Ebd.), was an einige Gespräche im Roman erinnert. Ein weiterer Bezug zu Goethes Roman ergibt sich, als der Erzähler Cäsars Rolle in seiner Beziehung mit Wally mit einem chemischen Bild beschreibt: „Cäsar war die Balancierstange dieser Equilibres. Er rektifizierte wie irgendein chemisches Natron alle die barocken Konfusionen, welche Wally anrichtete." (W 48).

So heftig sich Wally noch einmal gegen Cäsars durch literarische Vorbilder ‚verzerrte' Wirklichkeitsauffassung wehrt, kann sie ihm nicht widerstehen. Nun zeigen sich die Früchte seiner Erziehung: Allmählich wendet sich Wally vom „Idealen des Naturschönen" ab, beginnt, sich „an die Kunst, an das Gebilde der Phantasie" zu halten (W 54), schlägt schließlich „die rührende Geschichte nach, die ihr Cäsar erzählt hatte" (Ebd.) und, da sie sich „verächtlich vor[kommt], seitdem sie fühlte, daß sie für die höhere Poesie keine Gegenstand war" (Ebd.), beschließt zum Schluss, seinen Wunsch zu erfüllen. Die darauffolgende sogenannte Sigune-Szene bildet nicht nur ein raffinierter Kunstgriff Gutzkows, um die Prüderie seiner Zeit anzuprangern, sondern auch eine Potenzierung der Eingangsszene, denn vom Erzähler wird sie ausdrücklich als „reizendes Gemälde [beschrieben], ein Gemälde in altem Stil, zart, lieblich wie die saubern Farbengruppen, welche sich auf dem sammetweichen Pergamente goldener Gebetbücher des Mittelalters finden", umrahmt von „Epheu und Weinlaub" (W 56). Dieses Bild erscheint also – gemäß der Mittelalter-Vorstellung des 19. Jahrhunderts – „bezaubernd und märchenhaft […] wie ein Traum in den Tausend Nächten" (Ebd.). Die ganze Episode stellt also eine reine Illusion, eine an Kitsch grenzende Inszenierung (Götze 2003: 147) dar, wie am Ende deutlich wird: Als Wally/Sigune von der Realität eingeholt wird, d. h. als der sardinische Gesandte sie von hinten umschlingt und fortträgt, löst sich die „Phantasmagorie […] in Nichts" auf (W 57).

Obgleich sich Wally bald von Cäsar trennen muss und mit ihrem Ehemann nach Paris zieht, kehrt sie nicht in die konkrete Realität zurück: Vielmehr wird sie zur „fleißige[n] Bundesgenossin des großen Feldzugs gegen Natur, Wahrheit, Tugend und Völkerfreiheit" (W 59) und lebt weiterhin in einer künstlichen Welt. Infolgedessen treibt sie mit ihrem spielerischen – im doppelten Sinne – Verhalten den idealistisch-romantischen und realitätsfernen Jeronimo, den Bruder ihres Mannes, der sie „wie eine Nebelgestalt, die man sich aus Täuschungen zusammensetzt" (W 64) liebt, in den Abgrund. Jeronimo bildet eine Art Gegenpol zu Cäsar: Er ist ein ‚wahrer' Werther – ganz Gefühl und Empfindung, ein „exzentrischer Schwärmer" (W 72), der genau wie Wally mit Cäsar Opfer der Inszenierung seines Bruders wird. Um ihn seines Vermögens zu berauben, instrumentalisiert der sardinische Gesandte seine Frau und macht sie zum (un)bewussten „Werkzeug einer nichtwürdigen Intrige" (W 74).

Die zufällige Wiederbegegnung mit Cäsar – jenem Mann, dem sich Wally „auf ewig durch jene mystische Szene verpflichtet" fühlt (W 66) – bildet einen Höhe- und Wendepunkt der Geschichte und nimmt Wallys tragisches Ende vorweg. Nachdem Cäsar ihr während eines Unglücks plötzlich als tugendhafter Held

erschienen ist und das Leben gerettet hat (W 68), verschwindet er für eine Weile und kündigt schließlich an, Paris für immer verlassen zu wollen. Dies stürzt Wally in tiefste Verzweiflung, wobei sie in eine Welt „fieberhafter Phantasien" (W 70) und des Zweifels flieht: „Die Erinnerungen, Ideen und Ideenschatten jagten sich untereinander und gingen wahnwitzig lächerliche Bundsgenossenschaften ein und fraßen sich untereinander auf wie Ungetüme, denen die Gestalt, die Schönheit, die Freiheit des Willens und das Wort fehlt." (Ebd.). Erst als Cäsar sie wieder besucht, um die Pläne ihres Mannes aufzudecken und ihre ‚poetische' Unschuld zu retten, scheint sie wieder zu sich zu kommen und fängt wieder an, ihre Rolle in dessen Inszenierung zu spielen, was Jeronimo letztlich zum Selbstmord treibt. Wie das erste, endet also auch das zweite Buch des Romans mit einem Freitod aus unglücklicher Liebe. Wallys Verhalten ist nun jedoch ein anderes: Während sie in Bad Schwalbach noch Mitgefühl sowohl für die unheimliche Szene als auch für das tragische Schicksal der Frau zeigte, ist sie nun kaum berührt. Vielmehr nutzt sie das Ereignis als Vorwand, ihren Mann zu verlassen und mit Cäsar zu fliehen. Ihr Realitätssinn scheint inzwischen so weit verloren, dass selbst Cäsar über die Leichtsinnigkeit erschrickt, mit der sie „über das kaum getrocknete Blut [tritt], das hie und da mit zersplitterten Knochen vermischt war" (W 86).

Nun völlig aus der Realität ausgeschlossen, flüchtet Wally wieder in die „unsichtbare Welt" (W 128) der Poesie und anschließend in jene der Religion. Im dritten Buch, das – Cäsars Geständnisse ausgenommen – aus ihren Tagebucheinträgen besteht, schlüpft Wally zunächst in die Rolle der Schriftstellerin und beginnt, sich „wenigstens schriftlich mit ihr [der Außenwelt] zu beschäftigen" (W 87). Hatte Cäsar früher „Fähigkeiten, die sich als die eines Schriftstellers bzw. Erzählers bezeichnen lassen" (Harrocks 2000: 154), eingesetzt, um sie zu ‚erobern', d. h. um sie zu erziehen und zur Protagonistin seiner Inszenierung zu machen, so versucht sie nun, sich von ihm zu emanzipieren, indem sie selbst ‚Autorin' ihrer Geschichte wird. Doch dadurch verschwindet auch der letzte Schein von Unmittelbarkeit aus ihrem Leben. Je tiefer sie in ihre „satanischen Ironien" (W 93) sinkt, desto realitätsfremd wird sie: Wally vermag keine echte Verbindung mehr zur Welt oder zu anderen Menschen herzustellen und lebt weiterhin in einer selbst geschaffenen Fiktion, die von einer überholten romantisch-schaurigen Ästhetik geprägt ist (Drescher 2017: 171). In ihren Tagebuchreflexionen erklingen nämlich Motive und Topoi jener Literatur der Kunstperiode, die Wally durch ihre Erziehung gelernt hat, als ‚natürlich' zu betrachten. Dementsprechend lassen sich ihre anschließenden Zweifel an der Religion zugleich als implizite Kritik an der Kunstreligion der klassisch-romantischen Literatur (Rosenberg 1987: 62). Denn

wie Gutzkow in dem poetologischen Aufsatz erklärt, der dem Roman folgt und als interpretatorischer Schlüssel gelesen werden kann, sind Religion und Poesie verwandte Phänomene: Sie stellen „zwei Garantien der unsichtbaren Welt" dar, wobei „[j]ene das Reich der Möglichkeit auf[schließt], um zu trösten; diese, weil sie die Wirklichkeit erklären will. Beide beruhen auf Täuschungen" (Gutzkow 1998: 128). Doch Wally ist nicht mehr in der Lage, zur wahren „poetische[n] Wahrheit" (Ebd.: 130) zu gelangen, also zu jener Erklärung der Wirklichkeit, die die Literatur leisten sollte; ihre ästhetisch-literarische Erziehung durch Cäsar hat sie in ein Reich der Fantasie verbannt, in dem alles nur noch „Wahr*schein*lichkeit" ist, und in dem sie allerdings keinen Trost findet, sondern sich wie in einem „bodenlosen Abgrund, von wo keine Wiederkunft" (Ebd.: 105) ist, fühlt. Ihr verzweifelter Versuch, sich aus diesem „Halbschlummer" (Ebd.: 130) zu befreien, spiegelt sich in den Tagebucheinträgen wider, wo Wally stets zwischen „männlichen", d.h. emanzipierten, teils radikalen Gedanken (W 96), harscher Kritik an romantisch überhöhten Frauenfiguren wie Rahel Varnhagen und Bettina von Arnim (W 101), und typisch romantischen Narrativen – wie der Geschichte vom Schlafwandler Alfred (W 102-104) oder der ‚Frankenstein-Rhapsodie' (W 105-106), mit der sie den ersten Teil des Tagebuchs abschließt – hin- und herpendelt.

Der bereits zerbrechliche psychische Zustand der Protagonistin wird durch Cäsar weiter destabilisiert: Während er schließlich, wenn auch nur im privaten und nicht im öffentlich-politischen Raum, zur Aktion übergeht, also Wally für die freiere und realitätsnahere Delphine verlässt und nach Heidelberg zieht, um dort zivil zu heiraten, hört er dennoch nicht auf, Wally mit seinen Geschichten zu ‚quälen'. Denn Höhepunkt seiner Strategie stellen freilich jene „Geständnisse über Religion und Christentum", die er ihr zuschickt. In dieser Schrift, die nicht zufällig unter dem Schatten des Heidelberger Schlosses wie zahlreiche romantische Märchen und Geschichten verfasst wird, schildert Cäsar die Geschichte der historischen Figur Jesu als ein „Ereignis[ ] […], aus welchem spätere Zeiten ein episches Gedicht machten mit Wundern und einer ganz fabelhaften Göttermaschinerie" (W 110-111), wobei er damit versucht, die ‚traditionelle' Religion als eine ‚falsche' Mythologie zu entlarven, auf der „die Kunst, die Literatur, die Schönheit aller vergangenen Zeiten" (W 117) beruhen. Dagegen bekennt sich Cäsar zu einer neuen, säkularen Religion, die politische und soziale Emanzipation fördern soll. Doch seine Worte, die nach Aktion und Revolution rufen, sind halt auch in diesem Fall nur Projektion seiner andauernden Inszenierung als progressiver Intellektueller. Seine Passivität und „fehlende Konkretion" (Vonhoff 1994: 137) lässt sich unter anderem an der Rhetorik und Passivkonstruktionen erkennen, die er anwendet:

Die künftige politisch-soziale Revolution bezeichnet er als die „weißen Blätter einer Geschichte, die hinfort von uns beschrieben werden sollen" (W 123), wobei er nochmal die Literatur als Filter zwischen sich und der Wahrheit anwendet; später dann, in dem Aufruf, mit dem er seine *Geständnisse* abschließt, spricht er von jener neuen „Brücke [zwischen Himmel und Erde]" die „von neuem *gebaut werden* [*muß*]" (W 124), ohne sich allerdings selbst als ‚Bauer' dieser Brücke ins Spiel zu bringen. Seine Ohnmacht jeder (politischen) Aktion gegenüber und seine Neigung zur Darstellung bzw. Verarbeitung der Realität nur nach literarischen Maßstäben werden ebenfalls dadurch betont, dass der Schluss seiner Schrift – mit seinem prophetisch-emphatischen Ton und dem traditionellen Bild von Erde und Himmel – an die letzten Zeilen von Schlegels *Rede über die Mythologie* erinnert – ein letzter Beweis dafür, dass Cäsar nicht in der realen Welt, sondern im ästhetisierten Diskurs lebt:

> Mich däucht wer das Zeitalter, das heißt jenen großen Prozeß allgemeiner Verjüngung, jene Prinzipien der ewigen Revolution verstünde, dem müßte es gelingen können, die Pole der Menschheit zu ergreifen und das Tun der ersten Menschen, wie den Charakter der goldnen Zeit die noch kommen wird, zu erkennen und zu wissen. Dann würde das Geschwätz aufhören, und der Mensch inne werden, was er ist, und würde die Erde verstehn und die Sonne. (Schlegel 1967: 322)

Das Projekt einer neuen, emanzipierten Menschheit, das Cäsar in seiner Schrift entwirft, entpuppt sich letztlich als bloße literarische Übung, der jede Kraft zur politisch-sozialen Veränderung fehlt. In diesem Sinne wird Wallys Lektüre der *Geständnisse* zum letzten Akt ihrer ‚Erziehung': Nicht zuletzt aufgrund der suggestiven Lesesituation – „Es schlug Mitternacht, als Wally das saubergeschriebene Heft durchlesen hatte" (W 124)[12] – erscheinen ihr Cäsars Worte wie eine Schauergeschichte (Harrocks 2000: 168). Entsprechend werden sie von Wally als weitere literarische ‚Phantasmagorie' gedeutet, die ihre Zweifel an der Existenz einer echten Wirklichkeit nur verstärkt.

Die Vorstellung eines ‚goldenen Zeitalters', wie sie sowohl von den Klassikern als auch den Romantikern – und, wenn auch scheinbar unter anderem Vorzeichen, von Cäsar – gepflegt wird, ruft in Wally keine Hoffnung auf eine neue Zeit hervor, sondern apokalyptische Visionen von der Selbstauslöschung der Menschheit. Erst indem Wally infolge der Lektüre Selbstmord begeht – eine letzte Handlung, die sie

---

[12]   Damit wird wiederum durch einen literarischen Verweis auf den bevorstehenden Selbstmord Wallys angespielt, da Mitternacht die Uhrzeit von Werthers Suizid ist: „Es schlägt zwölfe! So sei es denn! – Lotte! Lotte, lebe wohl! lebe wohl!" (Goethe 2010: 199).

wiederum sorgfältig inszeniert[13] –, wird die zerstörerische Macht jener Literatur offenbar, die Heine als „romantische Schule" so scharf kritisierte: Nur durch die Opferung ihres ‚wahren' Lebens, kann Wally sich von der von Cäsar konzipierten Inszenierung befreien (Tebbe 2012: 1834). Ihre ‚ästhetische' Erziehung mündet somit nicht in die Bildung ihrer Humanität, sondern in ihre Vernichtung.

3. Fazit: Gegen die Tyrannei der alten Literatur

Wally geht also nicht (nur) an ihren Zweifeln zugrunde, sondern letztlich an der „Tyrannei" (W 55) der ‚alten' Literatur. Ein ähnliches, in mancher Hinsicht vielleicht noch tragischeres Schicksal erfährt auch Cäsar, der am Ende zwar überzeugt scheint, revolutionär zu handeln, faktisch jedoch im idealistischen Stillstand verharrt. Cäsar und Wally bilden im Roman somit eine Art „Doppelfigur" (Kaiser 1983: 148), an der die negativen Auswirkungen der Literatur der Kunstperiode exemplarisch veranschaulicht werden. Auf der einen Seite dient Cäsar als Beispiel für den ‚falschen' Intellektuellen seiner Zeit, der vorgibt, für progressive und liberale Ideale zu kämpfen, tatsächlich jedoch in den Fesseln seiner literarischen Sozialisation gefangen bleibt und lediglich überkommene idealistische Vorstellungen reproduziert. Diese verwandeln konkretes Handeln in ein abstraktes, idealisiertes Selbstinszenieren und verhindern damit jeden echten Fortschritt. Auf der anderen Seite verkörpert Wally die ‚Masse', die zu sozial-politischem Bewusstsein erzogen werden soll, jedoch durch eine nicht mehr zeitgemäße ‚ästhetische' Bildung mit überholten klassisch-romantischen Trugbildern und idealistischen Vorstellungen weiter indoktriniert wird, wobei ihre Emanzipation letztendlich scheitern muss. Anstatt zur Aktion aufzurufen, bewirkt eine solche Literatur eher das Gegenteil: Sie betäubt[14] ihr Publikum und macht es blind für die Realität. Beide Figuren sind also Gefangene, unbewusste Schauspieler, Marionetten[15] und Opfer eines „ästhetischen Spiel[s]" (Kaiser 1983: 195), das jedoch nicht zu einem ästhetischen Staat

---

[13] Nicht nur klingt in Wallys letzten Worten („Lebet wohl! Alle! Alle!", W 127) Werthers Abschied nach, sondern ihr Selbstmord lässt sich zudem als Anspielung auf den Freitod sowohl von Charlotte Stieglitz' (Vonhoff 1994: 147) als auch der romantischen Dichterin Karoline von Günderrode lesen.

[14] Nicht zufällig greift Wally „nach einem deutschen Buche, um sich in Paris einzuschläfern" (W 85).

[15] Man vergleiche dazu die Aussage, die Büchner seinem Lenz in den Mund legt: «Da wollte man idealistische Gestalten, aber Alles, was ich davon gesehen, sind Holzpuppen» (Büchner 2012: 164).

führt, sondern im Gegenteil die Literatur – wie die vom sardinischen Gesandten angezettelte Intrige zeigt – zum Werkzeug sowohl des alten politischen als auch des neuen ökonomischen Despotismus macht.

In diesem Zusammenhang stellen die Nebenepisoden bzw. das ständige Erzählen, Inszenieren und Imaginieren klassisch-romantischer Szenen kein bloßes Beiwerk dar. Vielmehr veranschaulichen sie performativ, jenem „dumpfe[n] Murmeln" (W 22) im Ohr der Trompeterfrau ähnlich, das andauernde Nachwirken alter literarischer Muster und Strukturen, die einen hemmenden Einfluss auf die Gesellschaft ausüben und gegen die die ‚wahren' Dichter anzukämpfen haben. Darüber hinaus lässt sich die Struktur des Textes als Kritik an traditionellen Formen der Literatur in zweifacher Hinsicht interpretieren: Einerseits entsprechen die drei Bücher, in die sich der Roman gliedert, drei traditionellen Gattungen – Gesprächs-, Liebes- und Tagebuchroman (Kleinwort 2016: 47-48) –, welche die allmähliche Abkehr des Individuums von Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft hin zu übersteigerter Subjektivität und Individualität (und letztlich dessen Tod) exemplifizieren, wobei *ex negativo* für eine aktivere Teilnahme am gesellschaftlichen Leben sowie für Literaturformen plädiert wird, die diesen Anspruch zu erfüllen vermögen. Andererseits zeugt die formale Freiheit des Romans – der keine ideale Geschlossenheit anstrebt (Steinecke 1983: 21), sondern die „Aufsprengung der ‚geschlossenen' Form des klassischen Prosagenres" (Rosenberg 1987: 53) –, von Gutzkows Versuch, sein Konzept von Literatur bzw. „poetischer Wahrheit" zu verdeutlichen, d. h. „revolutionär" (Gutzkow 1998: 130) zu verfahren und neue, damals unbekannte und auf ihre Weise ‚störende' Erzählweisen zu erproben.

Schlussendlich lässt sich *Wally* als Abbild einer literarischen Übergangsphase verstehen, in der Altes auf Neues trifft (Woywode 2019: 245). Was hier neu ist und in gewissem Sinne als Vorreiter des postmodernen Pastiches betrachtet werden könnte, ist ein spielerisches Zitieren und Wiederverwenden klassischer und romantischer Topoi sowie das Dekonstruieren herkömmlicher Romanstrukturen – und zwar nicht so sehr, um ein „romanistisches" Werden zu reproduzieren, sondern eher, um die reine Abstraktion offenzulegen, die hinter einer solchen Poesie steckt und den Menschen von seiner Realität entfernt, bis er diese nicht mehr erkennen kann. Ausgerechnet dieses Spiel war es, das damals – und noch lange danach – die Kritik störte und den Roman als „bedürftig", weil nicht harmonisch oder einem idellen Ziel folgend, erscheinen ließ: Wie in seinen politischen und journalistischen Schriften zielte Gutzkow auch mit seinen Romanen darauf ab, Unruhe zu stiften und alte Konventionen und Ideen aufzulösen.

Es handelt sich dabei also nicht um ein statisches Abbild, sondern um ein performatives, dessen Inhalt und Form zwar auf den ersten Blick chaotisch oder gar ‚verzweifelt' erscheinen mögen, was allerdings – im Gegensatz zu den im Roman eingefügten Inszenierungen – jede Identifikation mit den Protagonist_innen verhindert. Weder entführt der Roman die Leser_innen in eine künstliche Scheinwelt noch betäubt er sie durch ästhetische Überwältigung, sondern er konfrontiert sie mit den fortbestehenden Gefahren und problematischen Nachwirkungen der Literatur der Kunstperiode. In diesem Sinne fungiert Gutzkows Roman als eine Art „Schmuggelhandel"[16] seiner literaturkritischen Ideen und Überzeugungen und stellt dementsprechend keine idealisierende Inszenierung, keinen Versuch dar, die Aporien der Gegenwart in eine trügerische Harmonie zu überführen, sondern eher eine Denunziation, eine Anklage, kurz: das „Dokument einer bestimmten Zeit" (Kleinwort 2011: 51), in der man zwar wusste, was Literatur, insbesondere die Gattung des Romans, nicht mehr sein sollte, aber noch nicht, wie sie künftig zu gestalten sei.

Literaturverzeichnis

Primärliteratur

Büchner, G.

2012 „Lenz". In: *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, hg. von Ariane Martin. Stuttgart: Reclam, 153-181.

Goethe, J.W.

2010 *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Stuttgart: Reclam.

Gutzkow, K.

1998a *Wally, die Zweiflerin*. Studienausgabe mit Dokumenten zum zeitgenössischen Literaturstreit herausgegeben von G. Heintz. Stuttgart: Reclam.

Sekundärliteratur

Auctions-Katalog der von Karl Gutzkow nachgelassenen Bibliothek (Belletristik, Geschichte, Theatralia) [...] Oeffentliche Versteigerung gegen Baarzahlung am Dienstag den 2. Dezember 1879 [...] im Auctionslokale von Isaac St. Goar [Frankfurt am Main].

---

[16] So schrieb Gutzkow an den Freund Büchner einige Wochen vor der Niederschrift des Romans: „Treiben Sie wie ich den Schmuggelhandel der Freiheit: Wein verhüllt in Novellenstroh, nichts in seinem natürlichen Gewande: ich glaube, man nützt so mehr, als wenn man blind in Gewehre läuft, die keineswegs blindgeladen sind" (Büchner 1999: 399).

Briese, O.

1992 „Kannibalische Menschheit. Gutzkows Roman ‚Wally, die Zweiflerin' im Lichte seiner philosophischen und literarischen Quellen", *Wirkendes Wort* 42/3, 430-439.

Büchner, G.

1999 „Brief von Gutzkow, Karl: 17. 3. 1835". In: *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe und Dokumente in zwei Bänden*. Bd. 2, hg. von Henri Poschmann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 399.

Dobert, E.W.

1968 *Karl Gutzkow und seine Zeit*. Bern/München: Francke.

Drescher, M.R.

2017 *Poets of Protest. Mythological Resignification in American Antebellum and German Vormärz Literature*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Götze, K.H.

2003 „Was aus der romantischen Liebe wird, wenn sie der Zensur anheim fällt und politische Dienste leisten muß. Liebe und Sexualität in Gutzkows *Roman Wally, die Zweiflerin*", *Cahiers d'Études Germaniques*, 45, 137-148.

2006 „Ungleichzeitigkeiten der Liebe in der deutschen und französischen Romantik. Drei Stichproben: um 1800, um 1820 und um 1835". In: A. von Bormann (Hrsg.) *Ungleichzeitigkeiten der europäischen Romantik*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 347-364.

Gutzkow, K.

1831 *Forum der Journal-Literatur* 9, 29 August 1831. Berlin: W. Logier.

Hammer, A.

2018 „Minnegrotte". In: T. Renz, M. Hanauska u. M. Herweg (Hrsg.) *Literarische Orte in deutschsprachigen Erzählungen des Mittelalters*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 427-436.

Harrocks, D.

2000 „Maskulines Erzählen und feminine Wut. Gutzkows *Wally, die Zweiflerin*". In: R. Jones u. M. Lauster (Hrsg.) *Karl Gutzkow. Liberalismus – Europäertum – Modernität*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 149-163.

Herrmann, L.

2011 „Reconstructing Wally. Karl Gutzkows ‚Emancipation des Fleisches' und die Bewegtheit der Literatur". In: M. Blawid u. K. Henzel (Hrsg.) *Poetische Welt(en)*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 159-171.

Höllerer, W.

1958 *Zwischen Klassik und Moderne. Lachen und Weinen in der Dichtung einer Übergangszeit*. Stuttgart: Klett.

Kaiser, H.

1983 „Karl Gutzkow: *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (1835)". In: P.M. Lützeler (Hrsg.) *Romane und Erzählungen zwischen Romantik und Realismus. Neue Interpretationen*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 183-201.

Kleinwort, M.

2016 „Noch (k)ein letztes Wort und (k)eine letzte Hand – Karl Gutzkows *Wally, die Zweiflerin* und *Vergangene Tage*". In: K. Krüger, E. Mengaldo u. E. Schumacher (Hrsg.) *Textgenese und digitales Edieren*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 39-55.

Kruse, J.A.

1987 „Gutzkows *Wally* und der Verbotsbeschluss". In: J.A. Kruse u. B. Kortländer (Hrsg.) *Das junge Deutschland*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 39-50.

Löwenthal, L.

1981 *Das bürgerliche Bewußtsein in der Literatur*, hg. von Helmut Dubiel. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Mertens, V.

1995 „Bildersaal – Minnegrotte – Liebestrank. Zu Symbol, Allegorie und Mythos im Tristanroman", *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 117, 40-64.

Paulus, H.E.G.

1836 *Des Großherzogl. Badischen Hofgerichts zu Mannheim vollstindig motivirtes Urtheil uber die in dem Roman: Wally, die Zweiflerin, angeklagten Preßvergehen nebst zwei rechtfertigenden Beilagen und dem Epilog des Herausgebers*. Heidelberg: Karl Gross.

Rippmann, I.

1987 „»… statt eines Weibes Mensch zu sein« Frauenemanzipatorische Ansätze bei jungdeutschen Schriftstellern". In: J.A. Kruse, B. Kortländer (Hrsg.) *Das junge Deutschland*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 108-133.

Rosenberg, R.

1987 „Jungdeutsche Klassik- und Romantik-Kritik. Die Jungdeutschen als Literaturgeschichtsschreiber". In: J.A. Kruse, B. Kortländer (Hrsg.) *Das junge Deutschland*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 51-64.

Schillemeit, J.

2006 „Karl Gutzkow: *Wally, die Zweiflerin*". In: Id. *Studien zur Goethezeit*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 492-497.

Schlegel, F.

1967 „Gespräch über Poesie". In: Id. *Kritischen Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Bd. 2.1: *Charakteristiken und Kritiken 1796-1801*, hg. von H. Eichner. München: Schöningh, 284-362.

Sengle, F.

1971 *Biedermeierzeit*. Bd. 1. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.

Steinecke, H.

1983 Romantheorie der Restaurationsperiode". In: P.M. Lützeler (Hrsg.) *Romane und Erzählungen zwischen Romantik und Realismus. Neue Interpretationen*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 11-37.

Tebbe, K.

2012 „Suizid in der Neueren deutschen Literatur". In: M. Anderheiden, W.U. Eckart (Hrsg.) *Handbuch Sterben und Menschenwürde*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Bd. 3, 1833-1844.

Vonhoff, G.

1994 *Vom bürgerlichen Individuum zur sozialen Frage. Romane von Karl Gutzkow*. Frankfurt a.M. u.a.: Peter Lang.

2001 „Gegenlektüren in Gutzkows *Wally, die Zweiflerin*". In: G. Frank, D. Kopp (Hrsg.) *Gutzkow lesen!* Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 19-50.

2015 „›Correlation‹ als Signum der Moderne. Zu Gutzkows Frühwerk mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der *Beiträge zur Geschichte der neuesten Literatur* (1836)". In: S. Keppler-Tasaki, W.G. Schmidt (Hrsg.) *Zwischen Gattungsdisziplin und Gesamtkunstwerk*. Berlin: Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 423-439.

Wabnegger, E.

1987 *Literaturskandal. Studien zur Reaktion des öffentlichen Systems auf Karl Gutzkows Roman „Wally, die Zweiflerin" (1835-1848)*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Wegener, B.

1977 „Gutzkows ‚Wally‘ und die Folgen. Anmerkungen zu antisemitischen Elementen in der Literaturkritik des Vormärz", *Mannheimer Hefte* 1, 51-59.

Woywode, F.

2019 „Epigonalität. Anspruch und Scheitern in Karl Gutzkows Roman *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (1835)", *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 63, 243-277.

Zeller, R.

1995 „‚diese Verhüllung ist das reizende Gegenteil dessen, was sie scheint‘: Verhülltes und Enthülltes in Gutzkows ‚Wally, die Zweiflerin‘". In: W.M. Fues, W. Mauser (Hrsg.) *„Verbergendes Enthüllen". Zu Theorie und Kunst dichterischen Verkleidens*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 207-214.

ALESSANDRA GOGGIO

Università degli Studi di Bergamo
alessandramaria.goggio@unibg.it
ORCID code: 0000-0001-5344-7381

ALESSANDRA CALANCHI

Università degli Studi di Urbino

Detecting the Domestic Soundscape in the "Age of Noise": Alcott, Green, Campbell, Gilman

Abstract

Modernism witnessed a radical reconfiguration as far as sound is concerned, since the frontiers of literature and arts were opening up to experimentation and innovation as never before. The new array of sounds and noises in big cities, together with the voices and silences in families, and the sound-marks of war, religion, and racial/gender segregation, gave rise to new cultures of listening, so that sensorial perception started to become a new paradigm of knowledge.

I will briefly concentrate on some literary works by Louisa May Alcott, Anna Katharine Green, Alice Campbell, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which in my opinion anticipated modernism as far as sound is concerned. In each of them, the soundscape (or sonic environment) is pervasive and challenges the hegemony of sight in all its declinations. I believe these works truly deserve a place among the best products of their time and give a fundamental contribution to sound studies. In fact, they highlight such typical practices as overhearing, eavesdropping, crying, whispering, hearkening, and silencing (or being silenced), which are clearly and dramatically linked to gender issues.

Keywords: domesticity, crime fiction, Sound Studies, Alcott, Green, Campbell, Gilman

1. Sound and space

The modernist period witnessed many transformations in Western societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among other things, its wide experimentation and innovations radically reconfigured the experience of sound. While everybody was generally amazed by the emerging new technologies, women writers were particularly concerned with the sonic changes within the home, thus reaching an awareness about gendered domestic listening often ignored by otherwise thorough critics. Though including Alcott, Green and Campbell within modernist discourse might seem implausible, since canonical

periodization typically locates modernism in the first two decades of the 20th century (sometimes in the 1890s), I believe they strongly contributed to the development of a sound sensitiveness and awareness which would characterize modernism and become central in the following decades.

As a matter of fact, sensorial perception became a new paradigm of knowledge long before the term "soundscape" was coined by Murray Schafer in 1977. The process by which our ears detect sound waves or vibrations across a wide range of frequencies and our brains perceive them as sounds had been anticipated by the principle of resonance, which Galileo called sympathetic vibration. Nonetheless, the technology of sound took a long time to enter individual lives. In 1856 Leon Scott invented the "phonoautograph"; in 1874 Alexander Bell patented the "ear phonograph"; in 1877 Thomas Edison announced the invention of the phonograph, which is remembered as one of the technological milestones of the late nineteenth century, and then we have the development of the new graphophone and "perfected" phonograph between about 1886 and early 1888. In 1896 Guglielmo Marconi patented the wireless, and from the mid-1890s to about 1900 "phonograph parlors" were set up in many cities across the United States; in the period before 1910, the phonograph, graphophone, and gramophone improved in quality, and spawned a number of imitators; also, in the years from 1910 to about 1925 the "talking machine" (as the gramophone was now called) reached a peak in sales; in 1927 we find the first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*; and the term "high fidelity" was first used in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

All of this helps the contemporary reader understand the importance of sound and listening in the years comprised between 1870 and 1930. In this span of time, many women writers actively brought this revolution in sound technology into their works. They seemed perfectly aware of the "reformulation of the relationship between sound and space" that took place in those decades, partially because of the increased level of noise due to "modern technology: the roar of elevated trains, the rumble of internal combustion engines, the crackle and hiss of radio transmissions" (Thompson 2004: 2, 6), and partially because of their emergence as "new" women at home and in society. The very architecture of the house started to be analyzed as an engaging arena where the difficult roles of mother, wife, and daughter were to be played. Something of this already existed in gothic fiction, but here we have a more consistent consciousness of the private and political responsibility and consequences of listening in a society characterized by gender inequality,

As cities were growing rapidly and noisily, the study of sound was becoming progressively deeper: Lord Rayleigh's *Theory of Sound* dates from 1877, and

The Acoustic Society of America was organized in 1928, "institutionally acknowledging the tremendous expansion of the field of acoustics that had occurred since the turn of the century" (Thompson 2004: 60). New products and services, especially the telephone and radio, became important sectors of the American economy and offered new opportunities and resources for the study of sound.

Everybody perceived a radical change in the nature of noise: in 1896 Dr. J. H. Girdner had listed in *The Plague of City Noises* all traditional sounds (horse-drawn vehicles, peddlers, musicians, animals, and bells), but less than thirty years later this "plague" was no longer perceived as organic at all but included motors, elevators, the subway, and building noises (Thompson 2004: 117). Consequently, building materials became crucial to ensure more silence inside the home. In 1892 Samuel Cabot developed "a new type of padded building paper with excellent properties of both heat and sound insulation […] preventing the transmission of sound from one room to another" (Thompson 2004: 174). Not only that: one started to talk about risks for the health, and a Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noises was founded in 1907 because [quote] "a quieter America would be a healthier America" (Ober 2020: 81). Later, Vern Knudsen studied "the behavior of sound in rooms, and he focused his research on measuring the effect of reverberation on the intelligibility of speech" (Thompson 2004: 101).

In the following years, acoustical experts were constructing new means for defining and dealing with noise in the modern world. Also, they began to measure noise with electroacoustic instruments so that it became an essential aspect of the modern American experience, and an important means of "environmental control" (Thompson 2024: 72). By 1930, the whole process of reconceptualization of sound seems concluded: "The new vitality associated with acoustics […] was perceived not only by scientists. The public, too, had become 'sound conscious', recognizing the important role that acoustic technologies and commodities now played in modern life" (Thompson 2004: 59).

The connection between sound and space, and especially the idea of environmental control, is an important feature in literary works and its gender implications are often explored, though "not enough consideration has been given to the ways sound may be gendered and gender sounded. […] Thinking historically about gendered soundscapes can help us conceptualize sound as a space where categories of "male" and "female" are constituted, and by extension the ways that power, inequality and agency might be expressed in the sonic realm. This is really nothing more than tuning in to sound as a signifier of power (Ehrick 2015).

What has literature to do with all of this? In recent years there has been a proliferation of literary studies that have the theme of soundscape at their core, and this diffusion can only reinforce the links between reality and fiction, science and humanities, technology and private life. Having dealt with literary soundscape before, I have chosen to concentrate on four women writers here, starting with Louisa May Alcott and Anna Katharine Green and continuing with Alice Campbell and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The four works I have chosen reflect a common interest in the domestic soundscape, with a slight difference: while Alcott and Green did not seem interested in technology yet, Campbell and Gilman explicitly mentioned technology and insert devices in their plots. All of them, however, were typical representatives of a truly modernist way of listening, which is a fundamental part of their diegetic construction.

These are the titles: *A Whisper in the Dark* (Alcott 1877 an.), a story by the author of *Little Women*, often considered a gothic story due to the absence of a detective; *The Golden Slipper* (Green 1915), a tale by the renowned mother of American detective fiction; *Juggernaut* (Campbell 1928), Campbell's first novel and bestseller; and *Unpunished* (Gilman 1929), the only crime novel by this famous proto-feminist writer, which remained unpublished until 1997. In these works, different as they are from each other in length, plot, setting, and style, the sonic environment is pervasive and strongly challenges the hegemony of sight in all its declinations. Whether or not these authors were aware of being modernist (or pre-modernist, as in Alcott's case), of writing in modernist ways, and for a modernist readership, I believe they deserve a place among modernist writers, even more so because their works create a bridge between soundscape theories and gender studies, by problematizing such typical practices as overhearing, eavesdropping, crying, whispering, 'hearkening', and silencing (or being silenced).

2. Eavesdropping and overhearing

I shall start my journey into sound with *A Whisper in the Dark*, a short novel by U.S. writer Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women* (1868-69). It was published anonymously in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine* in July 1863 and republished in a volume entitled *A Modern Mephistopheles and A Whisper in the Dark* in 1869. Historically, the 1860s were dominated by the Civil War (1861-65) and Alcott herself volunteered as a nurse in the Union Army, serving at

a makeshift hospital in Georgetown, Washington D.C., for some weeks between 1862 and 1863. She wrote *Hospital Sketches* following such an experience (1863).

This short novel is not one of her best-known works, but it ought to be, since it is focused on an issue that was dramatic at her age and is unfortunately still highly topical nowadays, that is, physical and psychological violence against women. Even though the term "femicide" did not yet exist at that time, it is exactly what the story is about: a young woman is deceived, threatened, drugged, and finally accused of insanity and imprisoned, following the common thought by which any smallest deviance from "normality" was seen as a symptom of mental instability.

The plot tells of a nameless uncle who, after trying to make his niece marry his son and then himself, locks her up in a countryside madhouse to lay hands on her money. In his deed, he is helped by an unscrupulous doctor. Cases like this were so frequent in the 19th century that the years from mid-century to the 1930s were called the "Era of the Asylum", due to the significant expansion of confinement structures driven by the belief that moral and humane treatment could cure mental illness (Baron 1998). Such structures, supported by the so called "lunacy laws", were initially intended as supportive and safe havens, but they often became a true hell for patients, most of whom were women. For them, the asylum was not a place of refuge, but a place of incarceration and abuse (Rembis 2024).

As for the so-called rest cure, it was developed by neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell and focused on prolonged bed rest, overfeeding, and massage, often prescribed for women suffering from 'nervous' conditions like hysteria or neurasthenia (Shorter 1997). It involved complete isolation, restricted activity, and overfeeding, sometimes supplemented with electric muscle stimulation. While proponents believed it could restore vitality, it is now viewed as a form of medical misogyny due to its restrictive and often harmful effects, particularly on women. A famous short story by Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, focuses on the rest cure experienced by her female protagonist, who is driven to madness with the complicity of her 'loving' husband. Though this cure was considered better than leeching, cauterization and ovariotomy procedures, still "it too seemed sadistic, controlling, and intrusive" (Bassuk 1985: 245).

In our specific case, the 'asylum' is actually a simple house in the country, and the 'cure' is or should be mere confinement. In reality, no treatment is taken into consideration since the Uncle's true aim in imprisoning Sybil is to dispossess her of her inheritance.

In terms of locations, the story opens with a carriage ride; it continues in the residence that on her coming-of-age Sybil is expected to inherit along with

the estate; and it ends in the madhouse. The two houses are the main setting for the entire narrative. In the first one, Sybil learns about her destiny through attentive listening plus overhearing and eavesdropping. In the second one, the true epiphany of the tale is aural, not visual: the whisper of the title comes to make sense only towards the story's finale, just as the silence that precedes and envelops it comes to signify the silence to which women have long been forced.

In the tale we find the typical patriarchal triangle of family authority: the *pater familias* (who here is an uncle), a subjugated woman, and a compliant doctor. The girl is condemned to the loss of her personal possessions, her space, her freedom, and her identity. It is only through listening that she will be able to overthrow her dramatic situation: first, by *overhearing* and *eavesdropping* through a half-closed door, she learns about her uncle's plot; and then, through a closed door, she receives her mother's dramatic and mysterious message of salvation.

In this domestic context, the theme of eavesdropping is particularly relevant, since it introduces a new element into the narrative in an era when new devices that would enable oral communication were being designed. In Alcott's tale, eavesdropping and ear-witnessing become vital actions which lead to the acoustic climax of the story:

> […] I became aware that the room above my own was occupied by some inmate whom I never saw. A peculiar person it seemed to be; for I heard steps going to and fro, hour after hour, in a tireless march that wore upon my nerves, as many a harsher sound would not have done. […] day after day I listened to it, till I longed to cover up my ears and implore the unknown walker to stop, for heaven's sake. Other sounds I heard and fretted over: a low monotonous murmur, as of someone singing a lullaby; a fitful tapping, like a cradle rocked on a carpetless floor; and at rare intervals cries of suffering, sharp but brief, as if forcibly suppressed. These sounds, combined with the solitude, the confinement, and the books I read, a collection of ghostly tales and weird fancies, soon wrought my nerves to a state of terrible irritability, and wore upon my health so visibly that I was allowed at last to leave my room. (Alcott 1889: 18)

The quantity of sounds is overwhelming and invites the reader to plunge into this disquieting universe that seems bound to drive the protagonist crazy. The fact that such sounds combine with the protagonist's solitude and confinement (plus the books she reads) adds to the tragedy of her condition. Nonetheless, as we shall soon discover, the training in hearing and listening are destined to prove fundamental to her rescue. The story takes a turn when Sybil dares to go out into the corridor and even upstairs. It is there, in front of a locked door, that she will hear the whisper of the title:

[…] At midnight I woke to find myself standing in a streak of moonlight, opposite the door whose threshold I had never crossed. […] I saw a ghostly hand emerge and beckon, as if to me. […] A cloud swept over the moon, and when it passed the hand was gone, but shrill through the keyhole came a whisper that chilled me to the marrow of my bones, so terribly distinct and imploring was it. "Find it! For God's sake find it before it is too late!"

[…] Breathlessly I listened; the sound went on, stopped; a dead silence reigned; then something brushed against my door, and with a suddenness that made me tingle from head to foot like an electric shock, through the keyhole came again that whisper, urgent, imploring, and mysterious, "Find it! For God's sake find it before it is too late!" […] Till dawn I listened […] (Alcott 1889: 18-21)

Through this *whisper in the dark* Sybil will be able to save herself, so in this case the soundscape acquires a psychological and political function as well as a crucial gendered and prophetical significance:

Sybil's name underscores the ambiguities inherent in the text. The prophetic sybils of the ancient world were wise and articulate, whether writing their prophecies on the famed sybilline leaves or speaking their predictions. They were also doomed. The explicit prophet in the story is not Sybil herself but her mother, who prophesies her daughter's future in notes and attempts to communicate with her daughter in whispers. The text as a whole, however, can be taken as Sybil's prophetic narrative, directed at a reader/listener who must be warned against any expression of rage similar to Sybil's. (Carpenter 1986: 38)

It is her rage, in fact, that gives her uncle the opportunity to confine her: it is her rage that "her uncle's physician, the sinister Dr. Karnac, labels madness" (Carpenter 1986: 32). Nonetheless, both the rage and the whisper, though differently, are sonic means to communicate a serious disease. Through the former, Sybil will be judged insane and locked up; through the latter, her mother will be able to save her from madness – or worst. The gendered quality of sound and the political importance of listening are here perfectly represented and problematized, not only within the frame of domesticity but also within a mother-daughter relationship which, while reflecting the traditional idea of sentimental motherhood based on piety and morality (Doyle 2018), announces a new era of allyship against patriarchy.

3. Between the audible and the inaudible

A Whisper in the Dark can be considered a Gothic story, a proto-feminist tale, etc. but it might also be read as an intriguing example of a detective story without a detective. According to this interpretation, Alcott's protagonist is not actually

rescued by her cousin at the end of the story but it is she herself who, after investigating inside the house and hard listening to her mother's whisper, rejects the role of victim and faces physical and psychological violence as a true Private Eye – or better, Private Ear – would do (Calanchi 2020).

In Green's *The Golden Slipper*, written some years later, we find a real female detective. It is the first of a collection having young Violet as the protagonist. In all these stories Violet does as a part of her job exactly what Sybil did for herself. This is a step forward in the acknowledgement of the soundscape as gendered and as the sonic equivalent for the expression 'mirror of society'. The fact that Violet, a girl who belongs to New York City jet-set, works and gets money on her own, is so unthinkable at the time that she must hide what she does, in order not to incur the possibility of being disinherited by her father. Moreover, she is led into earning money by her desire to help her sister, who has been banned from the household for making a 'wrong' marriage. Here we have a father instead of an uncle, but again, we meet young women who must struggle hard for their economic independence and social rights.

This tale belongs to Green's mature activity as a writer, being published in 1915. It was a period of significant change, marked by both progress and upheaval. The 1910s saw the end of the Progressive Era, the rise of the United States as a global power, and the devastating impact of World War I. The U.S. maintained a policy of neutrality until the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915, which resulted in the deaths of over 120 Americans; this significantly shifted public opinion and fueled debate about U.S. involvement, which occurred in 1917. It was also the period of the 'suffragettes': the right for women to vote was passed by Congress in 1919 and was ratified in 1929 (19th emendment). Though Green published a much discussed article against universal suffrage, she always promoted the female right to economic independence throughout her life and writings (Calanchi and Malatino 2020).

The protagonist of *The Golden Slipper* is a young woman who investigates into typically domestic crimes where other women are involved. It is thanks to her sensitiveness, intuition, and total absence of bias that 'difficult problems' (as *cases* were called) can be solved. Sound performs a crucial function here, partially denoting emotions, in the wake of Edgar Allan Poe's tales focusing on fear, anxiety, madness, but more intensively infecting the very syntax, as if the author were searching for a correspondent of visibility – that is, audibility – in the representation of a criminal context perceived by a woman.

In this story Violet must deal with the disappearance of a jewel after a party. Simple as this crime may seem, it hides a much more complicated and dramatic

situation, which involves a young woman sick with kleptomania. This disease is characterized by an uncontrollable impulse to steal, and it was initially described in the early 19th century, when it was seen as a form of madness or a non-volitional behavior. It is no surprise that it was considered mostly female (just as hysteria) and as something to be ashamed of. In fact, kleptomania was linked to a rigid division of gender roles that assigned consumption activities to women, and, under the rubric "kleptomania", it was used to define gender – as well as class-based notions of theft (Abelson 1989: 123). Over time, the concept of kleptomania has been refined, moving from a general descriptor to a recognized impulse control disorder, though its underlying causes and mechanisms remain somewhat unclear.

The facts go as follow. Violet is invited to Mister Driscolls' house to prove his daughter Alicia is innocent. She is, in fact, suspected of stealing various items which magically reappear soon after. During the gala dinner, Violet makes friends with Alicia and her friends, boasting about a beautiful jewel of hers. After dinner they separate for the night. When Violet is in her room she sets her trap, leaving the jewel in full sight; then she goes to bed leaving a window open and waits for the burglar to appear. She is alone in her room, surrounded by darkness, and seeing progressively gives way to hearing, making her become more and more aware of sounds and noises:

> […] nothing happened, and two o'clock, then three o'clock struck, without a dimming of the blue scintillations on the end of her dresser. Then she suddenly sat up. Not that she heard anything new, but that a thought had come to her. "If an attempt is made," so she murmured softly to herself, "it will be by –" She did not finish. Something – she could not call it sound – set her heart beating tumultuously, and listening – listening – watching – watching – she followed in her imagination the approach down the balcony of an almost inaudible step, not daring to move herself, it seemed so near, but waiting with eyes fixed, for the shadow which must fall across the shade she had failed to raise over that half of the swinging window she had so carefully left shut. (Green 2009: pos. 28160)

This alternation of the audible and inaudible is exactly what Green tries to represent with her magistral double repetition (*listening – listening – watching – watching*) which, by amplifying her anxiety, underlines the echo effect (or reverberation) of her own beating heart – to such an extent that the past simple cannot render the scene and the author must switch to present tense. Violet's emotional reaction to sound shows that sight is revealing its impotence and failure to the advantage of a sonic experiencing of the world. The syntax itself is modified by the

acts of hearing and listening, and the heart beating contributes to the punctuation, rhythm, and suspense – together with the dashes, which graphically accompany the breathing. The repetition of *listening* and *watching* creates a sort of fundamental, and inescapably binary, experience of the world through two different senses, an experience which ought to coincide with a thorough comprehension of reality but gives just a partial knowledge of what is happening.

The investigation ends up with the discovery that the thief of the night before is not Alicia; however, she confesses her previous crimes: "A curse has been over my life – the curse of a longing I could not combat" (Green 2009: pos. 28298). She adds that love saved her (that's why she stopped stealing) and her father's acceptance of the truth cancels the reciprocal shame they felt. This is a very naif solution for a very deep question that involves gender and class. The importance of sound, however, also emerges in the final part of the story, though very differently from the passage previously quoted.

In the last pages, in fact, we find a long conversation between the father (on the one side) and the young women (on the other side). It is a strongly gendered dialogue, where it is only through deep listening that things are finally set. Questions, answers, and silences dramatically alternate in a crescendo of emotions, and Violet acts like an orchestra conductor in her final revelation. Here the female voice is a crucial instrument of communication, knowledge, and retaliation. Speaking out means to get free and be able to start a new life. No letters are involved here (as they are on many other occasions), nor pictures or descriptions whatsoever, but only voices and silences to be heard and understood. Violet wants to hear the other women's voices. She is not concerned with eyewitnesses, and even visible evidence is secondary with respect to the confession. Hers is an extraordinary intuition, or insight as we might say.

But unfortunately, there is no sonic equivalent for 'insight', a term which generally refers to the ability to understand something clearly and deeply, often involving a sudden realization or understanding of a complex situation or problem. It can also refer to the specific understanding or realization itself. In psychology, it is often associated with the Gestalt approach, where a problem is solved by a sudden restructuring of perception. This is exactly what Violet does in this and other stories. Yet, *sight* (the root of *insight*) has little to do with her perceptions, which mostly occur at the level of sonic experiences or, at most, synesthetically. Acknowledging the function of soundscapes in these tales can help critics and readers better understand and appreciate their innovative reach as far as gender, class, and sociocultural issues are concerned.

4. A disembodied voice

As we approach the 1920s, which are often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties", we meet a decade of significant social, cultural, and economic change. It was a period of prosperity and innovation following World War I, and this era brought along shifts in social norms, the emergence of a consumer culture, and the rise of new technologies. Therefore, I believe the time has come to introduce sound technology. Since the turn of the twentieth century, new media such as the phonograph, telephone, and radio had changed how sound was transmitted and perceived, and novelists began to use sound in new ways: to bridge the distance between characters, to connect with the reader on a more intimate level, or simply to experiment on the representation (and mechanical reproduction) of voices and noise. At the time, not only did face-to-face conversation lose its aspect of uniqueness, but:

> The deployment of microphones and loudspeakers into the soundscape occurred gradually but persistently over the course of the 1920s […] In order for a telephone conversation to be audible, the transmitter had to be held close to the speaker's mouth and the receiver adjacent to the listener's ear; thus telephonic sounds did not fully occupy architectural space as did the sounds of an ordinary conversation. (Thompson 2004: 233, 235)

A writer who appears particularly aware of technology is Alice Campbell, from Atlanta, Georgia. At the age of 29, she wrote and published her first novel, a thriller entitled *Juggernaut*, which was serialized in the *Chicago Tribune* starting from January 1928 and was a great success. *Juggernaut* is a long and rich crime novel, full of action and sensation, but it is also a powerful reflection on female work, power relations, and the moral limits of scientific research in a technologically very active period of the U.S. history. The title refers to a character of the story, a wicked doctor (who reminds us of Alcott's tale), but is also more generally linked to any force of evil capable of dragging entire families into ruin. Despite the setting, which owes much to the typical Gothic mansion, modernity creeps in everywhere. Among the several technologies described in the novel, I have chosen the telephone.

From the very beginning of the novel the telephone appears as an important element of the plot. In Chapter 1, Esther, a young Canadian nurse who wants to spend some time in Cannes, France, finds a position as a doctor's assistant and he lists her mansions: "little secretarial work, answer the telephone, and, of course, assist when there are examinations. The usual thing […]. Can you typewrite?"

(Campbell 2022: 50). If typewriting means a lot for women's emancipation in the previous novel, here the focus is on the telephone, which is mentioned once again in Chapters 7 and 12. Then we have a crescendo… and the telephone is quoted up to 53 times in the novel, while the telegraph only appears twice, and telegrams 11 times. This means that the telephone is not only a modern tool and an important means of communication, but it opens up new possibilities in the unfolding of the plot. The fact that the telephone needs the human voice and the human ear to work changes things completely, with regards to both strategies of narration and gender issues. Campbell shows the reader three important characteristics of this technology. First, the telephone is a status symbol, and not all households have one. Second, the owners of a private telephone can decide whether to permit a stranger to use it – especially if she is a woman, and a woman in distress, therefore weak and vulnerable. Third, the telephone can be used either for a good reason (e.g. to save a person) or for a bad reason (e.g. to call the police and make a false accusation)

As previously noted, the telephone appears in many parts of the novel, and always in crucial situations. The evidence of the murder, for example, is communicated to Esther by telephone. However, I have chosen two different passages. In the first one, Esther has just managed to escape imprisonment after being drugged and kidnapped. She has not drunk or eaten for two days, and she is desperately trying to find a telephone to save her lover's life:

> She must at once find a telephone; it was her one chance. A telephone – there must be one in the next villa; she would ring the bell and ask. […] The old face, unsmiling, critical, looked her over from head to foot. […] "*On n'a pas du telephone ici*", she replied with a Belgian accent, and pushed the door to in Esther's face.
> Outraged and disappointed, the more so as she had caught sight of the telephone-instrument in the hall, Esther stumbled down the steps and out again in the street […] Oh! To think a simple matter like finding a telephone should present so many difficulties!" (Campbell 2022: 245-46)

After several attempts, she finally finds a telephone, but the line doesn't work well so she eventually catches a cab and goes herself to the villa where one crime has already been committed, and a second one is about to be perpetrated.

The second passage regards the telephone call the suspected murderer makes from her own room:

> "The police!"
> "Yes, sir, three officers. They say someone telephoned for them […]"

> In blank astonishment Roger stared as three men in uniform filed into the room […]
> "Who sent for you to come here?" demanded Roger, more and more irate.
> The question had an unexpected reply.
> "*C'ètait moi, messieurs, qui viens de vous téléphoner. Moi je suis Lady Clifford*".
> The voice, metallic and defiant, rang out from the door leading into the right-hand bedroom.
> […]
> "*You* telephoned them?" he repeated, hardly able to believe his ears.
> "Certainly. I simply reported the fact to police headquarters that I am being kept prisoner in my bedroom". (Campbell 2022: 289-90)

The murderess's voice sounds *metallic*, and it *rang.* It is a voice that has lost all its humanity. The more she reveals herself for what she is, the more she becomes disembodied. Her voice must sound machine-like so that we can really despise her. The fact that this voice belongs to the "villainess" of the situation complicates things: Lady Clifford is a sort of Lady Macbeth, or dark lady, exactly the negative double of innocent Esther. They represent two opposite sides of femininity in a time when the disembodied voice was both challenged by and challenging in turn the machine-like quality of telephone communication. The medium is not the message yet, but it is on its way.

5. Points of listening

We shall stay in the 1920s, since the discourse on technology is not concluded yet. And I wish to mention Gilman again. The writer's most famous tale, the previously mentioned *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, has been widely analyzed from many different perspectives, including those focusing on men exerting "dissecting gazes" and women being at the center of their "visual attention" (Spengler 2008: 36). A few studies have highlighted the interdependencies between vision, gender, and power, the passivity of women as objects of spectacle, and the role of observation in the construction of female hysteria. As Spengler argues, "Gilman was careful to dramatize the visual dimension of surveillance and its psychological mechanisms" (2008: 41). Even though Spengler makes it clear from the start that her focus is not "on vision in terms of style or point of view, but on vision as action, vision on the level of plot and content, vision as a cultural and social practice" (2008: 4), what lacks here is an analogous 'focus' in the field of sound. I hope it is clear by now that sound has assumed the same importance as vision in the literary works under examination.

Since we have already introduced the use of sound technology in Campbell's novel (microphones, telephones, etc.), I wish to conclude our journey by going back to Gilman and particularly to a lesser-known work of hers. Gilman wrote essays, utopias, short fiction, always dealing with the condition of women and denouncing inequality and male abuse on women. *Unpunished* is the only crime novel she wrote (1927). Her masterpiece, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, lurks behind this novel, even though they seem so different under many aspects. *Unpunished* is, in fact, formally a detective story, but its contents are unmistakably referred to the same issues the author was concerned with all her life, that is physical and psychological violence against women within the very sanctuary of the home. It is a matter for reflection that it remained unpublished until 1997.

Here I am going to briefly concentrate on two different technologies which are both present in the novel: typewriting and the Dictaphone. They are strongly linked to gender, and they both perform an important narrative function. It seems that phonocentric logic faced a crisis of legitimacy once typewriters emerged, yet the dictation business continued with the invention of the phonograph, later renamed either Dictaphone (Columbia Phonograph Company) or Ediphone (Edison's National Phonograph Company). The Dictaphone is an instrument that since its introduction on the market (1907) was associated with the possibility of "spying" on employees – so much so that it was called the "Detective Dictograph," and the various models included an "Eavesdropping clock" that was in all appearances an innocuous clock laid on the desk. As one may expect, gender roles were tightly predetermined.

Another technology we find in the book is a system of pipes through which it is possible to listen to private conversations inside the house: it is based on "transduction", that is the conversion of acoustic waves in the air to waves of electromagnetism or pulses of electrical current. This system is called "Dionysus' Ear" in the novel, and it allows the occupants to hear conversations between two people in a room as well as the voice of one person speaking to a Dictaphone.

A short passage describing this "Ear" reveals its importance as a turning point in the plot, the major source of evidence in the investigation, and a modernist strategy of creating a powerful narration through sound. Here we do not have a traditional "point of *view*" or "perspective", or "focus"; on the contrary, all turning points are aural – we could call them "points of *listening*":

> We were in slavery, pure and simple! […] He let me have this room on account of the speaking tube to the kitchen, lucky for me.

> (Gilman 1997: 81-82, 90, Chapter 8)

September 1925
I found it quite by accident, sitting there and waiting for a telephone connection and playing with the standard. "They don't an –" said central, and I happened to turn something on the standard, and central was cut off and I could hear the cook talking in the kitchen! I listened in amazement, and while I was turning it back and forth to see how it worked I heard the maid setting [the] room beneath me in order, Vaughn's study.
[…] Now I shall find out perhaps why he sees so many clients in the evening […] I've heard the vague sound of voices below me.

(Gilman 1997: 94-95, Chapter 9)

"It's a relief to get out of that house," she proclaimed, "and be able to walk easy and talk out loud. Secret ears are worse than secret passages I think. I like investigation, but I hate creeping around […]. She doesn't know that I know anything about her 'ears', and further she doesn't know about the eyes-and-ears in that disused pantry, where I was".

(Gilman 1997: 127-28, Chapter 12)

"After your father's death Mr. Vaughn moved into the house? […] And you were given the room which had been your father's?"
"And my mother's when she was alive. He gave it to me because of the speaking tube to the kitchen and upstairs telephone. In using these I discovered a mechanical trick of my father's by which he could listen to conversation in the study below, or in the kitchen." […]
"And you made use of this device?"
"I did."
"Will you tell us something of what you overheard, so far as it may have a bearing on the tragedy."
"I learned that Mr. Vaughn was in the habit of receiving clients in the study, which he used as an office. […] As I listened it became apparent that most of them came to pay him money as the price of silence. He was a blackmailer."

(Gilman 1997: 156, Chapter 14)

"Points of listening" is not just a duplicate of "points of view", but it refers to actively listening to others. In other words, it is something more than simply hearing words – it involves a full understanding of the speaker's message, emotions, and aims. Many events and laboratories inspired by this concept appear in the realm of sound studies (cfr. website <pointsoflistening.net/>) while in psychology this term is used to combine understanding and empathy, relationship building, and problem solving /decision making. In some contexts, this expression starts being used instead of "perspective" (which is linked to view, sight, and vision), while in business language we have *mission* and *vision* but

still no word indicating sound. A change of paradigm was urged by philosopher Roberto Barbanti, who considers "decolonizing the imaginary" a necessity for human survival (2020).

The four case studies we have shortly analyzed give us the opportunity to reconsider the multifaceted nature of domesticity by interpreting the soundscape not only as functional to the plot, but as an arena of female resistance to patriarchy and control. I believe there is a strong potentiality in the intersection between sound studies and gender studies, for mutual benefit; and I hope I have raised questions and curiosities that can lead to studying other works in an unconventional, sound-centered way.

References

Sources

Alcott, L.M.

  1877 "A Whisper in the Dark", an., *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine*, rep. in A Modern Mephistopheles and A Whisper in the Dark, Roberts Brothers, Boston 1889. http://public-library.uk/ebooks/105/83.pdf

Campbell, A.

  1928 *Juggernaut*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, rep. Dean Street Press, Maiden Bradley, UK 2022.

Gilman, C. Perkins

  1929 *Unpunished* (unpublished), *The Feminist Press*, New York 1997.

Green, A.K.

  1915 *The Golden Slipper*, in *The Golden Slipper and other problems for Violet Strange*, G.P. Putnam's Son, New York, rep. in *Works of Anna Katharine Green*, Kindle Edition by B&B Books 2009. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3071

Special Studies

Abelson, E.S.

  1989 "The Invention of Kleptomania", *Signs*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Autumn), pp. 123-43.

Barbanti, R.

  2020 *Dall'immaginario all'acustinario. Prolegomeni a un'ecosofia sonora*, Galaad, Giulianova.

Bassuk, E.L.

  1985 "The Rest Cure: Repetition or resolution of Victorian women's conflicts?", *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives* (1985), pp. 245-57.

Calanchi, A.

2020 "Quando manca il detective. La presa in carico dell'investigazione in due racconti americani di fine Ottocento", *Linguae & Rivista di lingue e culture moderne*, No. 2/2020, pp. 59-70.

Calanchi, A. and V.M. Malatino

2020 "Il paradosso di Anna Katharine Green: il caso del voto alle donne", in *Narrazioni in giallo e nero*, Vol. 2, ed. by E. Ricci, Carabba, Lanciano, pp. 37-48.

Carpenter, L.

1986 " 'Did they never see anyone angry before?': The sexual politics of self-control in Alcott's *A Whisper in the Dark*", *Legacy*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall), pp. 31-41.

Doyle, N.

2018 Chapter: "The Fantasy of the Transcendent Mother The Disembodiment of the Mother in Popular Feminine Print Culture", in *Maternal Bodies. Redefining Motherhood in Early America*, University of North Carolina Press.

Ehrick, C.

2015 "Vocal Gender and the Gendered Soundscape: Reconciling Gender Studies and Sound Studies", 2 February 2015. https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/02/02/vocal-gender-and-the-gendered-soundscape-at-the-intersection-of-gender-studies-and-sound-studies/

Ober, K.P.

2020 "Mark Twain and Julia Barnett Rice's Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise", *Mark Twain Journal,* Vol. 58, No. 2 (Fall), pp. 81-97 (Jstor).

Rembis, M.

2024 *Writing Mad Lives in the Age of the Asylum*, Oxford University Press.

Shorter, E.

1997 *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac*, John Wiley & Sons, New York.

Spengler, B.

2009 *Visual Negotiations and Medical Discourses in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing (1860-1900)*, Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg.

Thompson, E.

2004 *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933.* The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. – London, UK.

ALESSANDRA CALANCHI

Università degli Studi di Urbino
alessandra.calanchi@uniurb.it
ORCID code: 0000-0003-2322-0092

ANDREA ACQUALAGNA

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

"Frozen Stillness": The American Sublime and the Meteorological Element of Snow in John Fante's "Books of Youth"

Abstract

This paper addresses the representation of snow in John Fante's novels *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938) and *1933 Was a Bad Year* (1985). While acknowledging its symbolic meanings, I contend that in Fante's "books of youth", the meteorological element primarily emerges as a sublime manifestation of nature that, by impeding human activity, resists conquest and mastery. Moving from a complex and gendered understanding of the American sublime, the analysis focuses on the characters' conflicted relationship with the snowy mountainous landscape of Colorado and their imaginative retreat into an idealized, springlike California. Interpreting snow as a narrative catalyst for brutality and death, this paper examines the familial animosities represented in the novels through the lens of the passive immobility fostered by the meteorological element. By situating Fante's novels within an American literary tradition that inscribes a twofold meaning in the nation's natural landscape, this interpretation also seeks to move beyond their traditional categorization as ethnic literature.

Keywords: John Fante, American Sublime, snow, Colorado, California

1. Introduction: The American sublime and the twofold perception of nature

"How does one stand / To behold the sublime?" (Stevens 1935 [1971: 130]), wonders Wallace Stevens's speaker in the 1935 poem "The American Sublime". As emphasized by literary scholar Rob Wilson, Stevens's metaphysical question, within an American context where the term sublime eludes a precise definition, "reverts into a more genealogical one worrying the context of any such sublimating perspective" (Wilson 1991: 3). The question, therefore, becomes: How does one stand to behold the American sublime?

In contrast with a European tradition of sublimity which identifies the sublime as a response in the bewitched spectator of the untamable natural realm (Burke

1823; Kant 1764), upon crossing the Atlantic, the concept of the sublime underwent an ideological transformation primarily ascribable to the vastness of the American landscape, its symbolic potential, and its imaginatively unconstrained extension. Despite varying interpretations of the concept, as Joseph Kronick observes, European treatments of the sublime "involve a dialectic whereby difference is maintained between self and other" (Kronick 1986: 54), where the self is the realm of the human actively experiencing the sublime and the other is the realm of the inhuman – namely the wild and untamed natural dimension – generating such a sublimating experience. Exceeding this dichotomous construction, the American rendition of the sublime overturns the long-established, delineated relation between self and nature,[1] emancipating the contemplating subject and ascribing sublimity to the contemplated scenery. The concept of the sublime emerges therefore in its first etymological meaning of boundary:[2] between the self and nature in the European interpretation and, as highlighted by Harold Bloom (who in turn recurs to Emersonian transcendentalism), between "*I and the Abyss*" in the American. Here "the Abyss" represents European tradition and history, "while for 'I' we can read 'any American'" (Bloom 1976: 255).

In this rearticulation, the imaginatively boundless natural dimension becomes a space in which the American subject may inscribe meaning, rather than a force that generates an aesthetic experience in the beholder, as in the European tradition. Thus, in the words of Donald Pease, "in the ideological American rendition, the sublime was not man's but Nature's discourse" (Pease 1986: 46). Through this subtle turn of the American sublime, argues the scholar, the anthropogenic design of nature's commodification was justified and promoted in the national process of westward expansion. If, as noted by Henry Nash Smith, the ideological character of the nation was primarily defined "by a relation between man and nature – or rather, even more narrowly, between American man and the American West"

---

[1]   In opposition with the Burkian or Kantian contemplating subjects always distinct from the contemplated landscape, the Emersonian (and later Whitmanesque) self ascends to an ontological plane whereby the contemplation of the natural dimension leads to a dissolution of egotism and the blurring of the boundary between the observant and the object of observation. In *Nature*, Emerson first theorizes the resolution of this dichotomy recurring to the image of the transparent eye-ball: "Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (Emerson 1836: 13).

[2]   From the Latin *sublimis*, compound of sub (under, beneath) and *limen* (threshold) (Onions (ed.) 1966: 880).

(Smith 1950 [1978: 187]), then the *Americanization* of the sublime is functional to this relation and "helped to consolidate an American identity founded in representing a landscape of immensity and wildness ('power') open to multiple identifications ('use')" (Wilson 1991: 5).

From this perspective, the sublime no longer designates an ideological aesthetic category but comes to signify the still-untamed natural dimension that resists and opposes domestication, though it remains open to imaginative projection. As such, the sublime functions as a counterforce to the national logic of conquest and domestication,[3] which envisions American nature as a potential idyllic space of anthropogenic control – a vision that resonates with Smith's myth of the Garden and Leo Marx's pastoralism (Smith 1950; Marx 1964). In other words, when applied to the American context, the sublime evokes that which remains untamed, or rather, that which has not yet been tamed and resists domestication. This conception of the American landscape produces a tension wherein nature is celebrated insofar as it is domesticated, though imaginatively emerging as untamed and unbounded.

This seemingly self-contradictory relation with nature, explains Louise Westling, is reiterated in American literature (Westling 2013: 4): Emerson's foundational essay "Nature", for example, celebrates nature as a divine and emancipating force but ends with a call for "the kingdom of man over nature" (Emerson 1836: 95). Likewise, at the beginning of "Walking", Thoreau presents himself as a spokesperson "for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness" (Thoreau 1862: 657), yet he goes on to acclaim the process of westward expansions at the expense of the very wildness he had praised. Many other examples can be provided, as scholars have widely observed this dichotomous perception of nature across American literature. Such a reading, though, has yet to be extended to the writings of John Fante, whose work provides an interesting approach of this very tension, as this paper attempts to demonstrate. Through an analysis of the sublime landscape of Colorado – exemplified by the recurring motif of snow

---

[3]   In his groundbreaking study *The Machine in the Garden*, with the term counterforce, Leo Marx refers to a vision that resists the national logic of nature's domestication, "either from the side bordering upon intractable nature or the side facing advanced civilization" (Marx 1964 [1967: 25-26]). Disregarding the latter, which aligns rather to what Frederic Jameson defines as "postmodern or technological sublime" (Jameson 1992: 37), with the term counterforce, I refer here to the former, which, in line with Rob Nixon's concept of non-human resistance, identifies the powerful retaliation of the targeted natural dimension "which may prove harder to commodify and profitably remove or manage" (Nixon 2011: 21).

– and the contrasting idyllic vision of a longed-for, imagined California in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938) and *1933 Was a Bad Year* (1985), this paper attempts to position Fante within this distinctly American literary tradition that inscribes a twofold meaning in the nation's natural topography. This interpretation not only aligns with recent approaches to Fante's works which have underlined the primary relevance of space in his production (Barattin 2021; Hawthorn 2018; Mariani 2018), but also aims at moving beyond the author's inscription within Italian American Studies – a critical framework that, though having substantially contributed to Fante's "rediscovery" and fortune in the late 1980s, has also determined his categorization as a niche author and impeded his rightful inclusion to American canonical literature.

2. Fante's "Books of Youth" and their critical reception

"Frozen stillness" (Fante 1985a: 25) is how Dominic Molise, the young protagonist of Fante's posthumous novel *1933 Was a Bad Year*,[4] describes the snowy and mountainous landscape of Roper, his hometown in Colorado. Transcending a mere meteorological depiction of the spatial setting of the novel, Dominic's definition powerfully evokes the restraining and overwhelming potential of the region's natural dimension, as well as the helplessness of the human response to it, becoming an accurate characterization of the sublime force of nature in Fante's works. Described by Ruth Hawthorn "as a writer centrally concerned by ideas of place" (Hawthorn 2018: 767), Fante situates his extremely space-conscious protagonists in distinctive environments that do not solely stand out as the geographical backgrounds where his picaresque heroes move, but also as spatial realities imbued with a profoundly symbolic significance, especially when read through the lens of the twofold perception of the American West's natural landscape.

In spite of the recurring manifestation of the sublime throughout Fante's work – most notably in the representation of the desert and the earthquake in *Ask the*

---

4   Even though the novel was only published in 1985, Fante had started working on the book in the first half of the 1950s. In a letter of February 1954, probably addressed to Stanley Salomen of Little Brown, the author notes: "I put in two months thinking, writing, and rewriting the novel we talked about at the Beverly Hills Hotel; story of the boy who runs away to become a big league ballplayer" (Fante 1991: 231). Defined as "not 'important'" and compared to *Full of Life* (1952) – a novel that Fante admitted was "only written for money" (294) –, *1933 Was a Bad Year* was set aside and only retrieved after the author's death.

Dust –, it is in his novels set in mountainous environments that the overwhelming, annihilative force of nature is most vividly and insistently rendered. These works, which Elisa Bordin classifies as "mountain writings" (Bordin 2019: 32), are predominantly set in the snowy Colorado landscape of the author's youth – with the notable exception of the 1977 novel *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, set in Northern California. Besides placing particular emphasis on the Italian descent, these works feature an interesting tension between human activity and natural impediments: a tension that stands at the center of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* and emerges in relation to the characters' conflicted relation with the meteorological element of snow.[5] Despite the significant time interval that separates their writing, the two novels share numerous thematic and narrative analogies that have led scholars to place them in close relation to one another. Catherine Kordich, for example, groups them – along with the novella "The Orgy" – under the label "books of youth" and argues that *1933 Was a Bad Year* "shows Fante taking *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*'s childhood poverty and ethnic marginalization to its teenage consequence" (Kordich 2000: 19) with the most evident difference being the age of the protagonists.

The similar narrative structures of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* revolve around what Richard Collins has defined as "epiphany of failure", a process of familial reconciliation after an initial collision determined by the individual's aspirations and dreams of assimilation (Collins 2000: 20). In the case of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the paternal figure of Svevo Bandini abandons his wife, Maria, and his three children at Christmas for an affair with the wealthy American widow Effie Hildegarde, momentarily impairing the stability of the family microcosm. The precarious domestic order is ultimately safeguarded by the fourteen-year-old Arturo, who, bringing his father back home, draws to a close what Ernesto Livorni has defined as his "Telemachy" (Livorni 1998: 56). Likewise, in *1933 Was a Bad Year*, the familial tensions are determined by the sports dreams of seventeen-year-old Dominic Molise. Whereas his father expects him to become a bricklayer, Dominic steals and attempts to sell his father's concrete mixer to gather enough money to reach California and try out as a pitcher for the Chicago Cubs. As in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, also in *1933 Was a Bad Year* the domestic animosities are eventually resolved; in this case by the paternal figure

---

[5]   In addition to the two novels analyzed in this paper, the other work by Fante that primarily features this tension in relation to the sublime element of snow is the short story "Bricklayer in the Snow" originally included in the 1940 short-story collection *Dago Red*.

who sells his mixer, symbol of his working struggles and source of revenue for the family, eventually accepting Dominic's aspirations and paying for the ticket to reach California.

Like the rest of Fante's "mountain writings", the two novels analyzed in this paper resort primarily to the themes of ethnic heritage and intergenerational cultural discrepancies between first- and second-generations migrants. Scholars have primarily concentrated on the analogies between the author's life and his works, detecting as their main tropes the protagonists' conflicted relationship with their Italian descent, the religiously drenched parental conflicting dialectic, and, specifically for *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the juxtaposition between Italian and American models of masculinity. Indeed, the majority of critical studies on *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* have placed it alongside the works of Pietro di Donato (Béranger 1994; De Lucia 2007) and Jerre Mangione (Buonomo 2003), or both (Gardaphé 1999, 2004). Moreover, even the studies that do not explicitly associate the novel with the works of other Italian American writers focus primarily on the characters' conflicted relationship with Italian culture, either from the paternal (D'Alfonso 2012; Marinaccio 2009), or filial perspective (Mattevi 2009). While *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* has extensively been studied by Fante's scholars, *1933 Was a Bad Year* has received scant critical attention, with the most noteworthy study by Collins (Collins 1994), concentrating on the connections between baseball and ethics in the novel.

The primary relevance of the Colorado environment and the underlying allegorical symbolism of the element of snow in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* are components detected by the majority of scholars, but only the works by Melissa Ryan and Mirko Mondillo have called attention to the relations between the landscape in Fante's first novel and the national rhetoric at the heart of the American process of conquest and domestication of the natural dimension. While Ryan, drawing from Leo Marx, suggests that *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* replicates the rhetorical model of imaginative conquest that has characterized America's mythical foundations (Ryan 2004: 187), Mondillo, in his study on *Tobacco Road* (1932) by Erskine Caldwell,[6] identifies and collocates Fante's first novel within an American narrative production that opposes the spatial dimensions of wilderness and plantation (Mondillo 2020: 111). Despite the scholars' original recognition of this correlation, this insight is only at the

---

[6]   Mondillo argues that, alongside *Hunger* (1890) by Knut Hamsun, Caldwell's novel is *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*'s primary source of inspiration (Mondillo 2020: 115).

germinal stage: whereas Mondillo only hints at Fante in his analysis of Caldwell's novel, Ryan's finding of a pastoral ideal in Fante's narrative is secondary and subjected to the analysis of the characters' imaginative construction of their American identities and symbolic "homes". Moreover, these readings are restricted to a pastoral interpretation of the natural landscapes represented in the novel, when in fact I believe that Fante's "books of youth" primarily feature a sublime force, which in what follows is analyzed in relation to the meteorological element of snow.

3. The immobilizing power of snow and its violent reverberations

Snow is a recurring motif in Italian American literature, dating back at least to Pascal D'Angelo's autobiography *Son of Italy* (1924). In Fante's "books of youth", however, it acquires a distinct narrative function, epitomizing a sublime natural force that actively resists conquest, domestication, and mastery. The aversion to snow as an overwhelming element that impedes human activity is evident from the first lines of the two novels. Indeed, both *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* open with a character's acrimonious meditation while walking home "through flames of snow" (Fante 1985a: 7). While *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* opens with the paternal figure of Svevo Bandini cursing and kicking the deep snow, in *1933 Was a Bad Year* the character trudging through the white mounds is that of the young Dominic Molise. Despite the same thematic use of snow as an immobilizing force, these diverse openings become emblematic of the novels' differing narrative perspectives. Whereas *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* presents a polyphony of voices that makes the father, the son, and the mother simultaneous protagonists of the novel, *1933 Was a Bad Year* centers on Dominic and his effort to overcome both familial expectations and the constraints of the Colorado winter. In this respect – differently from Fante's first novel but in continuity with the rest of the author's literary production –, *1933 Was a Bad Year* adopts a first-person narrator whose struggles, ambitions, and imaginative self-fashioning assume indisputable preponderancy in the narrative. This divergence in narrative perspective, however, only reinforces the correlation between the two novels with regard to the contemptuous attitude toward the snow, as it evokes an intertextual relation between the paternal and filial figures. Indeed, in addition to the more immediate connection between the two young characters of Arturo and Dominic – linked by their similar age, dreams, constraints, and roles in the

family –,[7] a more subtle connection between Svevo and Dominic also emerges, when the incipits of the novels are compared. Snow, in fact, not only forces Arturo and Dominic to "wait until spring" to pursue their dreams of baseball glory but it also impedes the bricklaying activity of the two paternal characters – Svevo and Dominic's father, who is left unnamed in the narrative. Hence, the narratives and destinies of fathers and sons appear intrinsically connected and contingent upon the restraining potential of the snowy Colorado landscape. The four figures thus converge into a composite character, which Rocco Marinaccio identifies in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as "the dreamer awaiting the rebirth of spring and a return to the activity" (Marinaccio 2009: 43): a tragic individual, who, paralyzed by the sublime nature of the cool Colorado winter, fantasizes about the arrival of the warm season and imaginatively withdraws to an idealized California.

This emblematic paralysis, however, not only prompts an imaginative escape to an idyllic, springlike dimension, but it also harbors a more ominous potential, as it evokes a mournful presage and often gives way to violent impulses. There is therefore little doubt, as Kordich observes, that "Fante places considerable symbolic weight on snow", as it not only epitomizes a dismaying immobilizing force but also renders the characters "most vulnerable to themselves and to each other" (Kordich 2000: 23). Snow – and the sublime dimension of nature more broadly – becomes in the two novels a narrative catalyst for brutality and death. From their very openings, in fact, both works recur to the meteorological element to foreground the subjects' fears, dismay, and denied opportunities, which in turn prompt an aggressive response and an impending sense of doom. Whereas the former is at the center of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the latter emerges more clearly in the opening of *1933 Was a Bad Year.* On his way home through the snow, in fact, Dominic "stopped dead" amid the freezing landscape, sensing "certain forces in the world at work trying to destroy" him (Fante 1985a: 7). Reminded of Grandma Bettina's belief that "snowflakes were the souls in heaven returning to Earth for brief visits" (10), Fante's protagonist links the white crystals to "the dead from the beginning of time" (10).

> I held out my hand and many flakes fell upon it, alive and star-shaped for a few
> seconds, and who could say? Perhaps the soul of Grandpa Giovanni, dead seven years

---

7   If we accept Kordich's collocation of *1933 Was a Bad Year* within the Bandini tetralogy (Kordich 2000: 46) – as following *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and preceding *Ask the Dust* – this connection is further reinforced by the protagonist's middle name of Dominic in the latter novel.

now, and Joe Hardt, our third baseman, killed last summer on his motorcycle, and all of my father's people in the faraway mountains of Abruzzi, great-aunts and uncles I had never known, all vanished from the earth. And the others, the billions who lived a while and went away, the poor soldiers killed in battle, the sailors lost at sea, the victims of plague and earthquake, the rich and the poor. (10)

While in *1933 Was a Bad Year* snow invites the protagonist to contemplate the spectral presence of the dead and reflect on the ephemeral and transient quality of human life, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* the same sublime element provokes a visceral reaction that leads Svevo to channel his physical and verbal violence against nature and God. The bricklayer, in fact, kicking the "suffocating snow" (Fante 1938 [1983: 12]) and glancing up at the snow-capped mountains, curses God and the meteorological element impeding the act of construction: "*Dio cane. Dio cane.* It means God is a dog, and Svevo Bandini was saying it to the snow" (13). This initial blasphemous reaction to snow suggests, as Mondillo argues, that Fante's novel develops along two structural tensions: between man and nature and between nature and the divine – with the latter emerging as a response to the first (Mondillo 2020: 111). In other words, Fante's narrative presents a triangular correlation between the human, the natural, and the divine; a tension ultimately resolved by the bricklayer through violence against the sublime manifestation of nature and blasphemy against its transcendent creating agent.

Snow's immobilizing power, then, goes beyond merely hindering the process of construction – as encapsulated by the bricklayer's blunt remark "no sunshine, no work" (11) – and compels Fante's characters to channel their frustration into acts of fierce and disruptive violence. These are often directed at female figures, who are symbolically linked to the sublime. This gendered dynamic – evocative of the imperialist rhetoric of the "land-as-woman" identified by Annette Kolodny in the colonial imagination of the American natural landscape (Kolodny 1975) – is central in Fante's works. While perhaps the clearest example is the association between Camilla Lopez and the harsh, untamed Mojave Desert at the end of *Ask the Dust*, the recurring connection drawn by male characters between women and snow – and the violence that originates from it – in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* is equally significant. This becomes evident, when, after shoving her into the snow and foretelling her death, Arturo projects the image of his beloved classmate, Rosa Pinelli, onto the Colorado mountainous landscape: "This was Rosa's land. This was Rosa's tree. Because you've looked at it, because maybe you've touched it. And those are Rosa's mountains, and maybe she's looking at them now" (226). Yet, it is above all in Svevo's relationship with Maria that this dynamic

of projection and violence most powerfully unfolds. Indeed, although Svevo's reactionary violence provoked by his impossibility to lay brick in the Colorado winter is initially directed at the snow – and at God for allowing its presence – this is soon deflected: first against inanimate objects symbolically linked to the cold landscape – Arturo's sled, the frozen laces of his run-down shoes, and the malfunctioning stove – and ultimately against his wife, Maria.[8]

Since her first mention in the novel, Maria is associated with snow: "the beautiful white snow was like the beautiful white wife of Svevo Bandini" (12). As scholars have noted, this association is undoubtedly symbolical as it gestures toward a complex interplay of themes – sexual, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic – that underpin Svevo's conflicted subjectivity. Following the bricklayer's train of thought, in fact, the correlation between Maria and snow promptly spirals into reflections on her sexuality and faith – and his simultaneous revulsion – as well as the crushing reality of his poverty and the impossibility of homeownership.

> And then he shuddered as you do when cold metal touches your flank, and he was suddenly remembering the many times he had got into the warm bed beside Maria, and the tiny cold cross on her rosary touched his flesh on winter nights like a tittering little cold serpent, and how he withdrew quickly to an even colder part of the bed, and then he thought of the bedroom, of the house that was not paid for, of the white wife endlessly waiting for passion, and he could not endure it, and straightway in his fury he plunged into deeper snow off the sidewalk, letting his anger fight it out with the snow. *Dio cane. Dio cane.* (14)

In this light, in line with scholarly interpretations, snow emblematically functions as a powerful symbol of Svevo's status as a poor immigrant who, despite his efforts and desires, remains unable to fully assimilate into American society and transcend the constraints of his ethnicity – embodied by his wife. Yet beyond its metaphorical resonance, it is snow's material force – as the sublime element that freezes the mortar between the bricks Svevo lays – that most viscerally wounds his pride and calls his manhood into question, impeding the act of construction and

---

8   Maria – or Mary in 1933 *Was a Bad Year* – is the name of the maternal figure in all of Fante's "mountain works", with the exception of the novella "The Orgy", where the name is not specified. The recurrence of this name is highly symbolic, as Fante's works set in mountainous environments are largely concerned with the characters' relationship with their Italian cultural and religious descent, primarily personified by the maternal figure. The emblematic significance of the name becomes clear in this passage from *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*: "Her name was Maria, and so was the Savior's mother, and she had gone to that other Maria over miles and miles of rosary beads" (Fante 1938 [1983: 32]).

determining his impotence. In this sense, Kolodny's "land-as-woman" metaphor proves particularly resonant: the act of construction, as a gesture of domestication and control over the American landscape, becomes metaphorically aligned with sexual conquest. As Ryan insightfully argues, "to conquer the wilderness or to own land is, on the level of metaphor, never quite separable from 'having' a woman, possessing her sexually" (Ryan 2004: 191). Svevo's reactionary rage to Maria and his impossibility to answer her demands for passion thus mirrors a deeper crisis: the humiliation of being rendered impotent by a sublime landscape that resists mastery.

4. Tainting whiteness with blood: The illusion of conquest and mastery

The sense of impotence that Svevo experiences in front of the sublime snow of the Colorado winter finds a counterpoint in the figure of the wealthy American widow, Effie Hildegarde. By providing Svevo with both employment – the repair of her fireplace – and the practical means to pursue it – an oil heater – Effie metaphorically presents herself not only as an alternative to his wife, but above all as an answer to his seasonal impediments. Svevo, in fact, notes triumphantly: "Let the winter blow! Let the temperature drop to freezing. Let the snow pile up and bury the town! He didn't care: tomorrow there was work. And after that, there would always be work. The Widow Hildegarde liked him; she respected his ability. With her money and his ability there would always be work enough to laugh at the winter" (Fante 1938 [1983: 183-184]). Whereas Maria, likened to snow, embodies the natural and sublime forces that obstruct construction and conquest, Effie represents agency, warmth, and the possibility of mastery, to the point that, in Svevo's mind, she comes to personify the oil heater itself.

> Bandini stood before the heater as though it was the Widow herself. He whistled in astonishment. This was too much for any man – too much. "A fine woman," he said, shaking his head. "Very fine woman."
>
> Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. The trowel fell from his hands as he dropped to his knees to examine the shining, nickel-plated heater. "You're the finest woman in this town, Mrs. Hildegarde, and when I get through with this fireplace you'll be damn proud of it!"
>
> Once more he returned to his work, now and then smiling at the heater over his shoulder, speaking to it as though it were his companion. "Hello there, Mrs. Hildegarde! You still there? Watching me, eh? Got your eye on Svevo Bandini, have you? Well, you're looking at the best bricklayer in Colorado, lady." (189-190)

From this perspective, the extramarital relationship between Svevo and Effie appears not as the result of lust, romance, or deliberate infidelity, but rather as a pragmatic response to "the wrath of winter" (171). As Marinaccio argues, the adulterous intercourse is undeniably charged with symbolic meaning, as it constitutes for the impoverished Italian bricklayer a solution to his ethnic, socio-economic, and sexual anxieties, standing in for "his long-deferred, heroic 'making of America'" (Marinaccio 2009: 51). Nevertheless, before taking on this symbolic weight, the encounter with Effie emerges, above all, as Svevo's immediate and practical response to the elemental hostility of the sublime snow, as he explains when he attempts to justify himself: "I got lots of troubles, Maria. The kids. The house. The snow: look at the snow tonight, Maria. Can I set a brick down in it?" (171).

Snow, however, remains in the narrative a symbol of immobility and violence from which the bricklayer cannot ultimately escape. Svevo's return home on Christmas Eve, in fact, demonstrates that his sexual and professional assertion and temporary subtraction from the cruel dynamics of the cold Colorado winter was only a momentary illusion. Hurling herself at her husband and clawing his eyes, Maria subverts the passive role in which she had been confined and inaugurates a process of reversal in the dynamics of power and authority of the domestic sphere. Leaving profound lacerations on his face, Maria stains with her husband's blood – the blood of "Bandini, hater of snow" (25) – the sublime meteorological element she had been compared to. Furthermore, Svevo's humiliation is compounded, as the bricklayer, in a final, ironic gesture of defeat, turns to the very snow he had cursed to soothe the pain of his wounds, pressing it against his lacerated face. The snow, once the enemy to be tamed, becomes instead his only source of relief as the bricklayer, eventually rendered again passive and submissive in the face of the sublime forces of the Colorado winter, taints the meteorological element with his own blood. Thus, the image of the white – and feminized – snow stained with Svevo's blood comes to represent the ultimate failure of the – masculine – attempt to dominate and tame the sublime nature of the Colorado landscape. At the same time, it also stands as a powerful symbol of Svevo's humiliation and emasculation: both as a metaphorical loss of "virginity" in his first sexual relationship with an American woman – according to Marinaccio, Svevo becomes Effie's prostitute (Marinaccio 2009: 60) – and as a symbolic act of surrender before the overwhelming force of snow. As such, it becomes something, that according to Arturo, "nobody should see" (164). The

young protagonist, therefore, attempting to conceal his father's abasing bleeding, kicks clean snow over the red spots – a gesture that mirrors Svevo's initial reaction towards the sublime and foreshadows the internalization of paternal failure and shame.

The image of snow spotted with blood recurs at other times in Fante's works. In another scene from *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, for example, Arturo, weary of eating eggs, kills an old hen by throwing a lump of coal at its head, leaving "a zig-zag of brilliant red painting weird patterns in the snow" (46) – this unsettling image could be read not only in relation to the interplay of violence, death, and snow, but also as an assertion of human power and control over nature.[9] Another recurrence of the image of blood-stained snow occurs at the end of *Dreams from Bunker Hill* when, just like Svevo in Fante's first novel, Arturo uses snow to make his face stop bleeding after being punched by the football player Biff Newhouse (Fante 1982: 143). The motif reaches its most emblematic expression in the last chapter of *1933 Was a Bad Year*. In this scene, the image of snow stained with blood not only reinforces the intertextual connection between the two characters of Svevo and Dominic – and more broadly between the two novels in their portrayal of violence and snow – but it also marks the resolution of the fraught relationship between father and son. Indeed, at the height of their violent confrontation, Dominic's father punches him in the nose for having stolen his cement mixer and challenges him to a fight. Yet upon seeing his son bleeding, "he rushed into the alley and plunged his hands into the snow and hurried back with two dripping handsful [sic]" (Fante 1985a: 117-118) to press them to his son's face. It is precisely at the sight of blood that Dominic's father, putting aside his wounded pride, crouches down to the snow and offers it to his son to alleviate his pain and stop the bleeding. For the first time, he recognizes his son's suffering, and listening to his aspirations and dreams, he seems to understand that his son, like himself, is trapped, limited, and ultimately victimized by his Italian descent, his poverty, and the sublime, immobilizing winter of Colorado. Moved by this recognition, he not only approves of his son's departure to California – despite his wish for Dominic to follow in his footsteps as a bricklayer – but also supports him financially, giving

---

[9]   This observation oversimplifies what is in fact a recurring and complex trope in Fante's works: the simultaneously conflicting and harmonious relationship with animals, a theme never analyzed by scholars. Though there are examples of this interesting dynamic in almost every longer work of the author, the most noteworthy and exemplifying is the protagonist's bizarre interaction with crabs in *The Road to Los Angeles* (Fante 1985b: 31-35).

him all he could gather from the sale of his mixer, the indispensable tool of his trade and the very object whose theft had sparked the conflict.

> Maybe the bloody nose was responsible, but for once we stopped being father and son and became friends, and I was able to tell him of my hopes and despairs, the boredom of poverty, the chance to leave home and try my hand at pro ball. He lit a cigar and walked to the door, his back to me, and I spilled out my dream as clouds of smoke filled the shed. When he turned to face me there was no anger or disappointment in his face, but a softness, a desire to understand and sympathize. (118)

This peculiar moment of intimacy and mutual recognition marks a rare suspension of the hierarchical and often conflictual relationship between father and son that characterizes Fante's works – especially his "books of youth". Yet, this reconciliation is not born out of genuine hope but, catalyzed by the sight of Dominic's blood – on snow –, rather emerges from a moment of surrender and resignation. Dominic's father eventually seems to realize his inability to ease his son's struggles, recognizing them as a reflection of his own. In implicitly accepting the futility of resisting a fate shaped by the "frozen stillness" of the Colorado winter, he surrenders to the only choice left to him: channeling his last resources into his son's journey to California. In selling his mixer, he not only relinquishes the prospect of passing down his trade to Dominic, but, in fact, he forsakes his own profession altogether. This decision thus takes shape as a resolution born of failure, in line with Collins' reading of the dynamics of family appeasements in Fante's novels (Collins 2000: 20). In spite of the restoration of a fragile sense of domestic peace, Dominic's father tacitly concedes defeat to the overpowering force of the Colorado winter and the sublime snow that impedes construction. In parting with his mixer, he surrenders also his role as the family's provider, entrusting his ultimate hope to Dominic's journey – less the hopeful pursuit of a better future than a quiet concession to the impossibility of change within the snowbound reality he inhabits.

The poignant reconciliation between father and son at the end of *1933 Was a Bad Year* resonates with the final scene of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, further emphasizing how closely linked – both thematically and structurally – these two novels are. In this scene, Arturo, accompanied by his new stray hound, Jumbo, reaches Effie's house to persuade his father to return home. Here, the resolution between father and son is ultimately prompted by the widow's racist insults toward Arturo, as she complains about the nauseating smell caused by the rotting corpse of a rabbit his dog retrieved from the melting snow and refuses to part with – yet another sign of the persistent connection between the meteorological

element and death. Just like the resolution in *1933 Was a Bad Year*, the domestic tensions in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* are ultimately unraveled at the expense of the paternal figure. As Marinaccio observes, this scene shows Svevo being further "humiliated in front of his son and unable to maintain the delusion of his mastery of the widow and his assimilation" (Marinaccio 2009: 62). Not only does Svevo return home stripped of his authority and virility – Arturo promptly observes that "his face still showed the marks of Christmas Eve" (Fante 1938 [1983: 258-259]) –, but the woman he believed could be the antidote to his seasonal unemployment, and who he thought admired his bricklaying as a form of art, ultimately sees him as nothing more than a poor, pathetic, foreign bricklayer, whom she seduces on her own terms. Nevertheless, while Svevo may endure humiliation and accept being labeled a "peasant" and a "foreigner" himself, he cannot tolerate the same judgment being passed onto his American-born son: "That's my boy. You can't talk to him like that. That boy's an American. He is no foreigner" (265). Thus, both paternal figures in the novels are ultimately doomed to failure – a failure sparked by the recognition that the illusion of conquest and mastery through the (sexualized) act of construction is unsustainable, and one that metaphorically extends to the impossibility of transcending their ethnic origins and socioeconomic marginality. Yet, both endure humiliation in an attempt to prevent this failure from being internalized and passed on to their children.

In both novels, therefore, snow undoubtedly serves as a powerful and multifaceted catalyst for symbolic meanings, becoming the element through which conflicts, violence, death, humiliation, the failure of mastery, and the possibility of familial reconciliation are articulated. However, contrary to Ryan's assertion that in Fante's first novel, "while we hear much about the snow […] there is no sense of pervasive cold" and winter is chiefly significant "as a symbolic event more than a phenomenon of the body" (Ryan 2004: 189), I argue that snow in Fante's "books of youth" functions not merely as a metaphorical backdrop to represent the characters' sexual, ethnic, and socio-economic limitations, but as a sublime element that both shapes the characters' fates and underscores the existential immobility from which they seek escape. Despite the underlying symbolical meanings associated with the meteorological element, snow and cold ultimately emerge as lethal, sublime manifestations of nature that, precisely in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, determine Rosa Pinelli's death from pneumonia. Eventually, the novel closes with Svevo and Arturo's homeward journey as the snow is starting to melt and the first glimpse of clear sky appears, auguring the coming of a warmer season. Nevertheless, Svevo's auspicious and forward-looking remark on the arrival of spring is promptly sapped

by the fall of one last snowflake, maybe – in line with Grandma Bettina's beliefs – the soul of young Rosa Pinelli returning to Earth.

> Bandini looked at a patch of blue in the east.
> "Pretty soon we'll have spring," he said.
> "We sure will!"
> Even as he spoke something tiny and cold touched the back of his hand. He saw it melt, a small star-shaped snowflake… (266)

Thus, through its cyclical structure – framed by the centrality of the sublime meteorological element at both the beginning and the end –, Fante's novel closes in a Joycean echo, as snow falls upon all the living and the dead.

5. Conclusion: The road to California

Defined at the beginning of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as the "rear end of God's creation" (Fante 1938 [1983: 16]), Colorado ultimately emerges in Fante's "books of youth" as a sublime natural landscape of violence and death that, subjugating the characters to a condition of immobility, renders them passive victims of their own ethnic, socio-economic, and sexual anxieties. Yet this condition of annihilation simultaneously fosters an imaginative retreat into an idyllic, springlike dimension – an idealized natural space that, in line with the propaganda of the time, finds its emblem in California.[10] Emerging as an imagined dimension of renewal and hope, California becomes a quixotic frontier juxtaposed with the wintry and bleak domestic space of Colorado. Whereas in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* this imaginative withdrawal appears moderately, chiefly as a response to Svevo's seasonal work impediments, it is in *1933 Was a Bad Year* that it becomes a central trope. In his homeward journey through the snow, at the beginning of Fante's first novel, Svevo's initial thought is a bitter questioning of why he never moved to California:

---

[10]   At the turn of the twentieth century and through the mid-1920s, a group of influential politicians, writers, and publicists crafted a narrative that marketed Southern California as an idyllic promised land. With the aim of luring settlers from the East and Midwest and profit from land speculation, the so-called boosters celebrated the region for its unique Mediterranean climate, affordable land, and abundant job opportunities. In reaction to this propagandistic rhetoric, a literary tradition – later defined by Mike Davis as *Noir* (Davis 2006) – emerged by the late 1920s. Inaugurated by writers such as James M. Cain and Horace McCoy, this regional fiction dismantled the idealized vision of Southern California by turning each alluring promise into its dark and ominous counterpart. Scholars like Davis and Mark Laurila (Laurila 1999) align Fante's Los Angeles novels with this specific literary tradition.

"It harassed him always, that beautiful snow. He could never understand why he didn't go to California. Yet he stayed in Colorado, in the deep snow" (Fante 1938 [1983: 12]). This self-query, which according to Kordich is a rhetorical question "for surely he is too poor for such a journey" (Kordich 2000: 30), points up the way California had crystallized within the national imagination as an immediate and almost instinctive fantasy of deliverance for those trapped by poverty and harsh environments. Imaginatively, California emerges as a space of perpetual sunshine where, even in winter, the trees bear fruit and nature itself seems to ease human hardship. It is this idea that indirectly surfaces when Maria, as she is once again asking for credit while awaiting the end of the snowbound season, catches sight of strawberries in Mr. Craik's shop and immediately thinks of California: "'Strawberries!' she said. 'And in winter, too! Are they California strawberries, Mr. Craik?'" (80).[11] Although this imaginative escape already surfaces, albeit implicitly, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, it is in *1933 Was a Bad Year* that it takes full shape, crystallizing into a perspicuous and pivotal motif. Here, California is no longer merely a fleeting fantasy of a warmer landscape, but emerges as a dreamlike, idyllic dimension symbolizing Dominic's sporting ambition. "Dreamers, we were a house full of dreamers" (Fante 1985a: 36), observes the young protagonist, who, together with his wealthy friend Kenny Parrish, fantasizes about Catalina, envisioning it as a tropical island where a life of freedom and prosperity would await them, if only they could escape the freezing and deathly grip of Colorado.

> "Catalina!" Ken gasped. "Palm trees along the blue Pacific! Blue skies bathed in sunlight, warm tropic nights! No snow! A little island paradise where all you do is play baseball and eat good food in a fine hotel."
> "I'm listening."
> "Think of it! And here we are, down in this ratty old basement, buried alive in a snowstorm. My God, Dominic! Catalina's just over the mountains, a measly fifteen hundred miles away
> It burst out of me: "Let's go, Kenny! Let's get the hell out of here before we die!" (61)

This exchange not only captures the idealistic dreams of two young boys united by their passion for baseball, but it also epitomizes a collective weariness and disillusionment with Colorado's sublime, inhospitable landscape. Kenny's eager outcry – "No snow!" – gives voice to the collective yearning for California's

---

[11]   This scene appears in chapter four of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. The whole chapter, with slight variations, was later published as a short story with the title "Charge It" in the posthumous collection *The Big Hunger* (2000).

climate, marketed, as Carey McWilliams observes, with promises of "no snow nor ice nor sleet" (McWilliams 1946 [1973: 103]).

With its revitalizing fruits and therapeutic climate, California emerges for Fante's characters as the inevitable destination in their attempt to escape the seasonal and familial constraints of Colorado's sublime landscape. As Fante's Californian works reveal, however, the promises of revitalization and prosperity envisioned by his characters in the "books of youth" ultimately prove to be illusory; the once-imagined idyllic nature and its sweet fruits turn instead into something noxious and corrupted, within a Los Angeles that, far from embodying a natural paradise, appears instead as "a sad flower in the sand" (Fante 1939 [2002: 13]). Yet such darker reflections remain distant from the tone of the two novels analyzed in this paper, where California still appears as an idyllic dimension of promise and expectation juxtaposed with the fierce and sublime seasonal constrains of Colorado.

References

Barattin, A.
    2021 "La Los Angeles di Arturo. Spazi reali e spazi immaginari nel romanzo *Chiedi alla polvere* di John Fante", *Kabul Magazine*, www.kabulmagazine.com/la-los-angeles-di-arturo/, accessed April 2025.

Béranger, J.F.
    1994 "Italian American Identity: The Masks of Religious Difference in the Novels of John Fante and Pietro Di Donato", *The Columbus People* 11(3), 58-78.

Bloom, H.
    1976 *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Bordin, E.
    2019 *Un'etnicità complessa. Negoziazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante*. Napoli: La Scuola di Pitagora.

Buonomo, L.
    2003 "The Italian American Man's Burden: Masculinity in John Fante and Jerre Mangione". In: L. Buonomo, *From Pioneer to Nomad: Essays on Italian North American Writing*. Toronto: Guernica, 61-73.

Burke, E.
    1823 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Thomas McLean.

Collins, R.
    1994 "Stealing Home: John Fante and the Moral Dimension of Baseball", *Aethlon* 12(1), 81-91.

2000   *John Fante: A Literary Portrait*. Toronto: Guernica.

D'Alfonso, F.

2012   "'Quel ragazzo è cittadino americano, non uno straniero'. Processi di integrazione culturale e lavoro nella società americana: John Fante e la 'primavera' di Bandini", *Itinerari. Quaderni di studi di etica e di politica* 2, 135-144.

D'Angelo, P.

1924   *Son of Italy*. New York: Macmillan.

Davis, M.

2006   *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso.

De Lucia, F.

2007   "Making America: The Narrative Aesthetics of the Early Italian American Novel", *SPELL* 20, 145-160.

Emerson, R.W.

1836   *Nature*. Boston: James Munroe and Company.

Fante, J.

1938   *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. New York: Stackpole Sons. [Repr. 1983] Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.

1939   *Ask the Dust*. New York: Stackpole Sons. [Repr. 2002] New York: Ecco.

1940   *Dago Red*. New York: Viking Press.

1982   *Dreams from Bunker Hill.* Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.

1985a   *1933 Was a Bad Year.* Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.

1985b   *The Road to Los Angeles.* Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.

1991   *Selected Letters, 1932-1981*. Edited by S. Cooney. New York: HarperCollins.

2000   *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932-1959*. Edited by Stephen Cooper. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow.

Gardaphé, F.L.

1999   "John Fante's American Fantasia". In: S. Cooper and D. Fine (eds.) *John Fante: A Critical Gathering.* Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 42-53.

2004   "Left Out: Three Italian American Writers of the 1930s". In: F.L. Gardaphé, *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Culture*. New York: State University of New York Press, 53-66.

Hawthorn, R.

2018   "Delinquent Dogs and the Molise Malaise: Negotiating Suburbia in John Fante's *My Dog Stupid*", *Journal of American Studies* 52(3), 766-786.

Jameson, F.

1992   *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.

Kant, I.

1764   *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings.* [Repr. 2011] Edited by P. Frierson and P. Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kolodny, A.

1975 *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Kordich, C.J.

2000 *John Fante: His Novels and Novellas*. New York: Twayne.

Kronick, J.

1986 "On the Border of History: Whitman and the American sublime". In: M. Arensberg (ed.) *The American Sublime*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 51-82.

Laurila, M.

1999 "The Los Angeles Booster Myth, the Anti-Myth and John Fante's Ask the Dust". In: S. Cooper and D. Fine (eds.) *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 112-121.

Livorni, E.

1998 "John Fante e la saga di Arturo Bandini". In: AA.VV. *John Fante scrittore e sceneggiatore*. Pescara: Ediars, 47-60.

Mariani, E.

2018 "John Fante e la poetica del fallimento. Conflitti etnici e generazionali nella Los Angeles suburbana di *My Dog Stupid*", *América Crítica* 2(2), 123-136.

Marinaccio, R.

2009 "'Tea and cookies, diavolo!' Italian American masculinity in John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*", *MELUS* 34(3), 43-69.

Marx, L.

1964 *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press. [Repr. 1967] New York: Oxford University Press.

Mattevi, Y.

2009 "The Face that is Fit: Ethnic Self-Destruction in John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*". In: E. Bellina et al. (eds.) *About Face: Depicting the Self in the Written and Visual Arts*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 177-193.

McWilliams, C.

1946 *Southern California: An Island on the Land*. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. [Repr. 1973] Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith.

Mondillo, M.

2020 "Dry Soul e Dry Soil in Erskine Caldwell: Amoralità e fiducia nella Provvidenza nei deserti di sabbia della *Tobacco Road*". In: G. Nori and M. Vallone (eds.) *Deserto e spiritualità nella letteratura americana*. Città di Castello: I Libri di Emil, 109-131.

Nixon, R.

2011 *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Onions, C.T. (ed.)

1966 *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pease, D.
   1986 "Sublime Politics". In: M. Arensberg (ed.) *The American Sublime*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 21-50.
Ryan, M.
   2004 "At Home in America: John Fante and the Imaginative American Self", *Studies in American Fiction* 32(2), 185-212.
Smith, H.N.
   1950 *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [Repr. 1978] Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Stevens, W.
   1935 "The American Sublime". In: *Ideas of Order*. New York: The Alcestis Press. [Repr. 1971] In: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 130.
Thoreau, H.D.
   1862 "Walking", *The Atlantic Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics* 9(56), 657-674.
Westling, L.
   2013 "Introduction". In: L. Westling (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.
Wilson, R.
   1991 *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

ANDREA ACQUALAGNA

Università degli Studi di Bergamo
andrea.acqualagna@unibg.it
ORCID code: 0009-0000-2469-2804

ALESSANDRO SECOMANDI

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

La "loca de la mina": una lectura de *Amirbar* de Álvaro Mutis

The Madwoman in the Mine: A Reading of *Amirbar*, by Álvaro Mutis

RESUMEN

En *Amirbar* (1990), una de las últimas novelas de la saga narrativa *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero* (A. Mutis, 1986-1993), destaca la figura de Antonia, una mujer estrafalaria que, al final de la historia, intenta quemar vivo a Maqroll. El ensayo propone demostrar que Antonia se inscribe en el paradigma gótico de la "loca encerrada", evocando en particular a Madeline Usher de *"*The Fall of the House of Usher*"* (E.A. Poe, 1839) y a Bertha Mason de *Jane Eyre* (C. Brontë, 1847). A través de numerosas convergencias temáticas y de algunas correspondencias lingüísticas, el cotejo intertextual ofrecerá una perspectiva inédita sobre este singular personaje.

Palabras clave: *Amirbar*, Mutis, gótico, "The Fall of the House of Usher", *Jane Eyre*

Abstract

In *Amirbar* (1990), one of the final novels in the narrative saga *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero* (A. Mutis, 1986-1993), the character of Antonia emerges as an eccentric figure who, by the end of the story, attempts to burn Maqroll alive. This essay argues that Antonia can be situated within the Gothic paradigm of the "madwoman in the attic", particularly recalling Madeline Usher from "The Fall of the House of Usher" (E.A. Poe, 1839) and Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* (C. Brontë, 1847). Through a detailed examination of thematic parallels and linguistic resonances, this intertextual comparison will provide an unprecedented perspective on this unique character.

Keywords: *Amirbar*, Mutis, gothic, "The Fall of the House of Usher", *Jane Eyre*

1. Introducción

La atención que la crítica ha dedicado a las *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero* (1986-1993), la heptalogía narrativa de Álvaro Mutis sobre su personaje más célebre, es claramente desigual. Esto, quizás, se debe a su tendencia un

poco reiterativa, ya que algunos títulos de la saga resultan muy similares a nivel temático, estructural o de desenlace. No parece casual, entonces, que abunden los aportes en torno al primer capítulo, *La Nieve del Almirante* (1986), mientras que los que se ocupan de los siguientes son relativamente escasos.

Lo mismo sucede con *Amirbar* (1990), antepenúltimo episodio del ciclo. De hecho, pese a que esta novela presente algunos elementos únicos dentro de las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, hasta hoy los ensayos que la han abordado específicamente son solo dos: López (2000), brillante, pero enfocado en una interpretación política de la obra, y Uscátegui Narváez (2014), más cercano a nuestra visión y, sin embargo, mucho menos agudo que el anterior.

La lectura de *Amirbar* propuesta aquí se centra en Antonia y en la relación entre ella y Maqroll. A través de un cotejo con Madeline de "The Fall of the House of Usher" (E.A. Poe, 1839) y Bertha de *Jane Eyre* (C. Brontë, 1847), ambas, cada una a su manera, transgresoras sexuales y encerradas vivas que acaban agrediendo al protagonista o a algún comprimario, se muestra que incluso Antonia corresponde a la figura de la "loca del desván", o de la cripta, parafraseando el título de un famoso ensayo de Sandra Gilbert y Susan Gubar.[1] Como otros trabajos acerca del Gaviero que están próximos a publicarse,[2] la pista intertextual no debe considerarse necesariamente genética, dado que, excepto por un caso, no sobresalen coincidencias tan exactas como para hipotetizar un vínculo "fuerte" con Poe y Brontë. Además, aunque es reconocido que Mutis "disfrutaba de Edgar Allan Poe [y] los ingleses" (Hernández 2024: 183), sus mayores modelos son otros: por ejemplo, Melville, Stevenson, Conrad y los románticos franceses.[3]

La perspectiva adoptada en este artículo se alinea con las tendencias más "libres", si bien razonadas, del comparatismo; el objetivo primario, por tanto, es identificar aquellas convergencias temáticas que, aunque no constituyen indicios estrictamente filológicos de que "The Fall of the House of Usher" y *Jane Eyre* sean

---

[1]   La referencia es a *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, 1979). Para ellas, este *tópos* remite al horror de la sociedad victoriana "at the thought of cavern confrontations and the evils they might reveal – the suffocation […] the vampirism, the chaos" (Gilbert – Gubar 2000: 87).

[2]   El artículo forma parte de un proyecto de investigación trienal de la Universidad de Bérgamo ("Sobre Maqroll el Gaviero de Álvaro Mutis. Perspectivas intertextuales, traductológicas y transmediales", Departamento de Lenguas, Literaturas y Culturas Extranjeras, 2022-2025), que incluye una monografía en proceso de publicación, varios ensayos en revistas académicas y ponencias en seminarios y congresos nacionales e internacionales.

[3]   El primer aporte comparativo dedicado a la obra completa de Mutis, y, en particular, a las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, fue Hernández (1996).

las principales fuentes para Antonia, sí permiten destacar el paradigma común entre ella, Madeline y Bertha. De este modo, se ponen de manifiesto ciertas facetas inéditas de la coprotagonista de *Amirbar*.[4]

A menudo se hace hincapié en el imaginario gótico que personifica Antonia, la "loca de la mina". Castillos, cementerios, vampiros y monstruos, o espacios claustrofóbicos y personajes alienados, como en este caso, son solo algunos de los motivos del género en cuestión, una especie de subconjunto de lo fantástico con rasgos más definidos y constantes, y donde el miedo adquiere una centralidad mayor.[5] Está claro que "The Fall of the House of Usher" es auténticamente, en todos los sentidos, un cuento de horror; en cambio, *Jane Eyre* solo recurre al *tópos* de la encerrada viva a través de Bertha, pero es un *Bildungsroman*. También está claro que *Amirbar* "explota" lo gótico como una veta ocasional, que emerge de vez en cuando y, especialmente, en el desenlace de la línea narrativa dedicada a Antonia. No obstante, el cotejo resulta absolutamente legítimo: los capítulos siguientes demuestran sus fundamentos.

Antes de continuar, es importante dejar sentado que, aunque se menciona el ensayo de Gilbert y Gubar, no se busca aquí proporcionar una lectura feminista ni del paradigma de la "loca encerrada", ni de las relaciones intertextuales entre *Amirbar*, "The Fall of the House of Usher" y *Jane Eyre*. Tampoco se propone una interpretación psicoanalítica, ni un enfoque que pretenda ir mucho más allá de la superficie del texto. El fin, y conviene insistir en ello, es ofrecer a través del cotejo una serie de observaciones que puedan servir de base para futuras investigaciones sobre un personaje hasta ahora prácticamente ignorado por la crítica, y que, además, resulta verdaderamente singular dentro de las *Empresas y tribulaciones*. Parte de esta singularidad – tal es la hipótesis que aquí se plantea – radicaría precisamente en su resonancia con ciertas figuras prototípicas del imaginario gótico.

En cambio, es inevitable remitirse al marco semántico de la desesperanza, verdadero eje de las *Empresas y tribulaciones* y, en general, de la poética de Mutis. A este se vuelve al final de cada capítulo.

---

4   La que se asume es, por consiguiente, esa forma sistémica de intertextualidad teorizada a partir de los ensayos de Julia Kristeva de los años sesenta. Al respecto, es de apreciar la síntesis de John Frow: "The identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not [necessarily] a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading [...]. Intertextual analysis is distinguished from source criticism both by this stress on interpretation rather than on the establishment of particular facts, and by its rejection of a unilinear causality (the concept of "influence")" (Frow 1990: 46).

5   Un reconocido aporte introductorio sobre la literatura gótica es Punter (2013).

2. En las profundidades de Amirbar

En *Amirbar*, la historia sigue el típico esquema narratológico de las aventuras de Maqroll, habitualmente contadas a través de una voz interna. El narrador, amigo del Gaviero y alter ego de Mutis, se encuentra con él en Los Ángeles, donde Maqroll se está recuperando de una malaria en un motel de mala muerte. Tras una breve estancia en el hospital, el Gaviero se instala en casa de Leopoldo, el hermano del narrador (y del propio Mutis), en el distrito de Northridge. Allí, a través de un extenso flashback, empieza a relatar sus aventuras en la mina de Amirbar.

La historia comienza cuando Maqroll llega al pequeño pueblo de San Miguel, ubicado en una región montañosa de Colombia. Dora Estela, la dueña de la posada local, le habla de una mina "maldita", llamada Zumbadora, que supuestamente aún contiene oro. Eulogio, el hermano de Dora, le cuenta a Maqroll sobre una masacre en la que los soldados mataron a unos ingleses y sus ayudantes que trabajaban en los socavones. Pese a las advertencias, el Gaviero, poco supersticioso, decide explorar la Zumbadora, donde descubre tanto el oro como los cadáveres de los asesinados. Por esto se ve obligado a abandonar la mina rápidamente y sin poder sacar provecho del hallazgo, ya que el ejército intervendría para ocultarlo de nuevo.

Poco después Maqroll, junto con Eulogio, prueba suerte con otra mina, que es más difícil de alcanzar y, a la vez, más prometedora. La nombran "Amirbar", palabra que proviene del árabe *amīr al-baḥr*, 'señor del mar', y que Maqroll cree oír resonando desde las profundidades de las galerías, aunque en realidad se debe solo al viento que pasa por las cavidades subterráneas. Esta mina resulta aún más lucrativa que la anterior, y los trabajos de extracción avanzan sin problemas hasta que Eulogio es detenido por las autoridades militares durante uno de sus viajes a la capital.

Es en este punto cuando Antonia, una pariente de Dora Estela, entra en escena, reemplazando a Eulogio en las galerías. Enigmática, ya que es generosa en el trabajo y, al mismo tiempo, esquiva, su presencia marca un giro en la historia. Pronto, entre ella y Maqroll nace una relación tanto apasionada como heterodoxa: para Antonia, el sexo puede solo ser anal, para evitar el embarazo. Según Maqroll, esta práctica se convierte en una extensión de su obsesiva búsqueda de oro, así que la mina, Antonia y el metal precioso se funden en su mente en un torbellino de deseo y locura, intensificado por el ambiente claustrofóbico de Amirbar.

La situación se agrava cuando Antonia, cada día más enamorada de Maqroll, se lo confiesa. Por su naturaleza errante e incapacidad para establecerse, el Gaviero

no puede corresponderle, lo que desencadena la lenta e inexorable desesperación de Antonia. En un arrebato de locura que, no obstante los indicios, difícilmente el lector podría prever, ella intenta quemar vivo a Maqroll. Pero el Gaviero logra escapar con una pequeña cantidad de oro; luego, debe esconderse de los militares que se han enterado de su presencia en Amirbar, mientras que Antonia, completamente enloquecida y fuera de control, es internada en un manicomio, donde se encierra en una mudez irreversible. Finalmente, Maqroll se embarca hacia La Rochelle, concluyendo este capítulo de su vida.

Queda claro de este resumen que *Amirbar* no presenta nada fantástico *stricto sensu*, es decir, supuesta o concretamente sobrenatural. Maqroll sabe, por lo menos en retrospectiva, que la llamada de los socavones es fruto de su imaginación, siempre orientada al mar y por tanto perturbada por el trasfondo hipogeo, que le resulta totalmente ajeno. Sin embargo, si se considera la famosa dialéctica de Tzvetan Todorov entre "maravilloso" y "extraño", en la que lo fantástico estaría justo en el medio como intervalo de vacilación,[6] el segundo término, lo raro, abunda en *Amirbar*.

Además del contexto, que Maqroll percibe como ominoso exactamente por ser subterráneo, también Antonia encaja en este paradigma de lo plausible que, de todas maneras, siempre linda con lo inverosímil. No solo, obviamente, su agresión al Gaviero, sino su personalidad hermética y su inusual – para Maqroll – manera de amar forman, con la actividad de extracción, un conjunto tanto excitante y deseable como enajenador. Bien lo explica Maqroll:

> la mina cambió de aspecto para mí y se cargó aún más de ese ámbito ritual y abscóndito […]. La relación con Antonia, marcada por la forma irregular de nuestro abrazo, comenzó a confundirse en mi mente con la atmósfera mítica del sitio. Era como un rito necesario, invocador de fuerzas escondidas en la entraña del viento que giraba en la gruta invocando al Emir de los mares, que se cumplía en medio de los breves gemidos de Antonia cuando culminaba su placer. [Era] parte del ceremonial de un culto sin rostro, de un misterio ciego […]. En una ocasión en que Antonia fue a la capital para vender el oro que habíamos reunido, tardó en regresar mucho más de

---

[6]   La referencia es al clásico *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970). Según Todorov, lo fantástico es "l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît pas que les lois naturelles" (Todorov 2013: 26). Después de la incertidumbre, que normalmente tiene una duración limitada, el hecho inexplicable puede revelarse ultramundano de veras, es decir, "maravilloso", o solo estrafalario, o sea, "extraño". A pesar de su rigidez y de cierta arbitrariedad, el aporte de Todorov es imprescindible para definir esta modalidad literaria. Entre las investigaciones siguientes sobre lo fantástico, se recomienda la tesis doctoral de Zeppegno (2009).

lo usual. Fueron cuatro días de ansiedad, durante los cuales perdí por completo el control de mí mismo. La voz de la mina se escuchaba en las noches con una claridad tal que terminé dialogando con ella. Un deseo intenso, casi doloroso, torturaba mi imaginación y mis sentidos hasta pensar que Antonia había sido una invención de mi fantasía para poblar la soledad de la gruta (Mutis 2002a: 469-470).

Entre las mayores señales retóricas de inspiración fantástica, sobresalen la "ansiedad", la pérdida total de control, la "imaginación" torturada, e incluso la duda de que Antonia sea solo una "invención", una "fantasía para poblar la soledad de la gruta". Nótese también el *Leitmotiv* de la ritualidad: la forma "irregular" de amarse se transmuta en algo complementario a las febriles actividades de excavación y a la voz de Amirbar.

Para que lo extraño se articule en su expresión máxima, solo falta un estallido de violencia en la cumbre de la tensión. De hecho, como subraya Eric Savoy, usualmente lo gótico – que a menudo recurre a lo raro – presenta una mezcla de "claustrophobia, atmospheric gloom [and imminent] violence [that are] generated [by] locales as the haunted house, the prison [and] the tomb" (Savoy 2002: 168). Esto es lo que ocurre en *Amirbar*, después de que Antonia comprende que el Gaviero nunca echará raíces.

Interesante es el clímax, súbito y construido en pocas páginas, que culmina en la agresión.[7] En primer lugar, Maqroll menciona que "[h]abía algo que comenzaba a preocuparme en relación con [Antonia]" (Mutis 2002a: 473): se trata, si bien todavía de forma tenue, de las primeras señales perceptibles de decepción sentimental. Mutis juega luego con otro motivo, en este caso visual, que es frecuente en la ficción de misterio. Se reconoce de manera empírica como un auténtico cliché del cine de terror, incluso contemporáneo: la cara sellada e impenetrable, generalmente con una mirada fija y angustiante.[8] En tres ocasiones, después de los síntomas iniciales de frustración, el "rostro" de Antonia inquieta a Maqroll porque está oculto o es "hermético" ("[en él] no se reflejaba

---

[7]   Todorov, si bien nunca utiliza la palabra "clímax", reconoce, de todas maneras, que es una técnica típica de lo fantástico (*lato sensu*, o sea, sin distinción entre fantástico puro, extraño y maravilloso). Lo fantástico, de hecho, empieza por "une situation parfaitement naturelle pour aboutir", de modo progresivo, "au surnaturel" (Todorov 2013: 154-155).

[8]   Véase la lista de motivos góticos que proporciona Misha Kavka: "The ruined castle or abandoned house on a hill made hazy by fog; the dark cemetery dotted with crosses and gnarled, bare branches; the heavy-built wooden doors that close without human aid; the high, arched or leaded windows that cast imprisoning shadows; *the closeups of mad, staring eyes* [;] these are the elements by which the historically mutable Gothic has become Gothic film" (Kavka 2002: 210; cursivas mías).

ningún cambio" [Mutis 2002a: 476]). Antonia se convierte en una esfinge muda y apática, excepto por "cierto desconsuelo [que] se [iba] haciendo en ella más repetid[o] y clar[o]" (478).

La tragedia está a la vuelta de la esquina. Una noche, tras un breve y triste diálogo con Antonia, quien no logra contener las lágrimas, el Gaviero se despierta de repente por un intenso olor a gasolina: ella le grita que con él había tenido hijos, lo injuria, e intenta quemarlo vivo. Maqroll se pone a salvo arrojándose a un río, cerca del cual los dos se habían acampado, y encuentra refugio en una granja. Esta es la primera etapa de su huida, tanto de la mujer como de los militares que lo buscan. En cuanto a Antonia, al final se descubre que "había llegado [a San Miguel] y tuvieron que llevarla a la capital el mismo día para encerrarla en el manicomio. Deliraba en medio de ataques de furia, atacaba a la gente y no reconocía a nadie" (481).

Este desenlace es precisamente lo que respalda la inscripción de Antonia en el paradigma de la encerrada viva, ya que en dos momentos, al ser internada en el manicomio, se recurre de forma inequívoca a ese campo semántico: "tuvieron […] que encerrarla" (481), y la "encerraron" (482). Se trata, sin embargo, de una inscripción "heterodoxa". En efecto, a diferencia de los casos de Madeline y Bertha, en los que el encierro es sistemático y responde a una violencia familiar o social, en Antonia la reclusión presenta una ambigüedad estructural. Por un lado, durante su estancia en las profundidades de Amirbar, ella está confinada voluntariamente, por motivos laborales, pero también imaginariamente, como si fuera una emanación de la gruta misma, una proyección enajenada del Gaviero. En cierto modo, es él quien la transmuta, en su fantasía, en una figura abisal, surgida del corazón del subsuelo. Por otro lado, el ingreso de Antonia en el manicomio – aunque tiene lugar solo en el tramo final del relato – marca una reclusión definitiva, ya no simbólica ni voluntaria, sino impuesta, medicalizada y absoluta.

Es justamente esta tensión entre decisión propia, imaginación alucinada y encierro institucional lo que permite leer a Antonia como una variante significativa de la figura de la encerrada viva. Por añadidura, el ingreso en el manicomio constituye el melancólico epílogo de un personaje único en las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, que obviamente resulta ajeno a las figuras femeninas positivas de la saga, como Flor Estévez de *La Nieve del Almirante* e Ilona Grabowska de *Ilona llega con la lluvia* (1987), con las que podría compararse en un primer momento; pero, por lo radical de su antagonismo, es también ajeno a aquellas – poquísimas – que de alguna manera ponen en peligro a Maqroll

(en esas mismas novelas, en orden, la nativa y Larissa).[9] Además, las preferencias eróticas de Antonia son un detalle al que la trama regresa con una constancia sin precedentes en las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, otorgándoles una función mucho más caracterizadora que la de la mera curiosidad picante.

Como sintetiza Victor Ivanovici,

> Antonia funge inicialmente de asistente y ayudante del Gaviero en sus labores mineras, luego se vuelve amante del protagonista, a quien exige e impone la práctica del sexo anal. La demoniza, pues, esta doble transgresión: por un lado se dedica a actividades incompatibles con su condición de mujer y, por otro, comete e induce a cometer el "pecado nefando". A partir de un determinado momento, el caso va cargándose de oscuras amenazas […]. Rito blasfemo, puesto que ofrendar a los dioses marinos los aberrantes retozos de un navegante con una "montañera", escarbar la entraña de esa hembra en busca del placer como se escarba la de una mina en busca de oro, equivalía a sembrar la confusión dentro del universo, cuyo orden descansa sobre el necesario deslinde de sus dos regiones ontológicamente fuertes, el mar y la tierra (Ivanovici 2017: 26).

Aunque es inexacto afirmar que Antonia "exige e impone la práctica del sexo anal" al Gaviero, dado que, a pesar de parecerle heterodoxa, Maqroll goza de ella (más en general, seguramente no se trata de una violación), y aunque el texto, en realidad, no insiste en la transgresión que supondrían esas "actividades [mineras] incompatibles con su condición de mujer", el resumen de Ivanovici remarca bien el vínculo entre la "loca" y el contexto. Relevante y agudo es el empleo de la palabra "demonización" ("[l]a demoniza"), ya que en efecto, para Maqroll, Antonia se transforma – retóricamente – en una criatura espantosa que vive en simbiosis con las grutas, y con la maniática tarea de extracción que allí se cumple.

Sin embargo, más o menos como la llamada de Amirbar, esta es solo una proyección del Gaviero. No existe ninguna relación factual entre el trasfondo minero y las costumbres sexuales de Antonia: es la inquietud de Maqroll, que casi siempre en la saga presenta matices delirantes,[10] la que hace que una simple

---

[9]   La indígena es una habitante de la selva que viola a Maqroll y, al parecer, lo hace enfermar de una fiebre similar a la malaria, casi letal; Larissa, en cambio, es una mujer con un pasado oscuro, que establece una relación ambigua con Ilona y termina haciendo estallar el carguero en el que ambas se encuentran.

[10]   Sobre las fiebres de Maqroll, se recomienda Rodríguez Amaya (2000: 164-166) en relación con el ciclo poético: las mismas reflexiones valen para la heptalogía narrativa. Por cierto, en torno a la continuidad entre la poesía y la prosa de Mutis que se enfocan en el Gaviero, cf. Barrero Fajardo (2012).

coincidencia se convierta en nexo causal. O sea, si "el caso va cargándose de oscuras amenazas", en las puntuales palabras de Ivanovici (2017: 26), es solo por la sensibilidad extrema de un hombre de mar, evidentemente algo conservador, que por añadidura está trastornado a causa de la atmósfera de los socavones. Con respecto al último elemento, el Maqroll que "habla" como narrador – es decir, el que ya ha vivido esas tribulaciones en calidad de personaje, y que ahora, en California, las está desenterrando – se da perfectamente cuenta de que todo lo que pasó en Amirbar no es más que una estrafalaria cadena de contingencias. Véase, por ejemplo, esta confesión:

> Antes de caer en el sueño, me vino a la memoria la palabra que escuché en la mina y pude distinguirla con toda claridad. Era Amirbar. Eulogio aún no se había dormido y le comuniqué mi descubrimiento. Se quedó un momento pensativo y luego comentó: "Sí, creo que eso más o menos es lo que se oye. Pero no quiere decir nada, ¿verdad?". Le dije que significaba general de la Flota en Georgia [...]. A partir de entonces, siempre designamos a la mina con el nombre de Amirbar. Me quedé largo rato despierto pensando en los enigmas que nos plantea eso que llamamos el azar [...] un orden específico que se mantiene oculto y solo de vez en cuando se nos manifiesta con signos como este que me había dejado una oscura ansiedad sin origen determinado [...]. Una extraña fiebre comenzaba a invadirme por oleadas que iban y venían durante el día y, en la noche, se instalaba para poblar mis sueños con un disparatado desfile de imágenes recurrentes y obsesivas. El delirio malsano de las minas comenzaba a mostrar sus primeros síntomas (Mutis 2002a: 454).

Por esto puede considerarse al Gaviero un narrador relativamente fiable; no lo sería, en cambio, si creyera en la realidad de la exhortación subterránea incluso en retrospectiva.[11]

Ahora bien, lo que se ha señalado constituye un principio fundamental de lo extraño según Todorov. No hay nada efectivamente sobrenatural en esta declinación literaria, sino una serie de circunstancias cuya suma es improbabilísima, pero sin salirse nunca del marco de lo verosímil.[12] Lo problemático en el testimonio de Maqroll es que, incluso *a posteriori*, él afirme que exactamente los hábitos

---

[11]   El concepto de narrador no fiable resulta tanto difundido como intuitivo: es una voz que no puede, o que no quiere ofrecer un testimonio fidedigno de los acontecimientos. Después de su primera teorización por parte de Wayne Booth, en los años sesenta, se ha desarrollado al respecto una específica esfera de investigación. A este propósito, un aporte introductorio sólido y no obsoleto es Nünning (2008).

[12]   Precisamente en torno a "The Fall of the House of Usher", afirma Todorov: "L'étrange [...] est constitué par des coincidences [...]. Ainsi pourraient apparaître surnaturelles la résurrection de la sœur et la chute de la maison après la morte de ses habitants; mais Poe

de Antonia han desencadenado su violenta locura: esta "demencia", explica el Gaviero, "debió germinar pausada y sordamente a través de sus […] desvíos eróticos practicados con obsesiva aplicación" (Mutis 2002a: 488). De nuevo, y esta vez sin percatarse nunca del error, Maqroll confunde otra coincidencia con una rígida conexión causal. Se podría, de manera algo ingenua, inferir que la frustración le ocasiona a Antonia un desengaño tan profundo como para perder por completo la razón. Pero, al mismo tiempo, resultaría trivial y puritano aceptar la conjetura de que su viraje alienado y agresivo se deba solo a sus "inusuales" preferencias eróticas, como si estas bastaran, por sí solas, para explicar el desborde.

La lectura intertextual propuesta en el próximo capítulo parte de la hipótesis de que, bajo esta cortina de psicologismos someros, lo que es la "etiología" de Maqroll, haya mucho más en juego. De hecho, en la literatura anglófona del siglo xix destacan dos célebres figuras femeninas que, en un sentido más radical que Antonia, están encerradas vivas; que están caracterizadas, en clave patológica, por ciertas prácticas sexuales heterodoxas o exuberantes; que, finalmente, atacan a otros personajes, en un caso intentando quemar al coprotagonista. Es plausible, si no probable, que Antonia sea un calco, cuando menos lejano, de Madeline Usher y Bertha Mason. En efecto, no es únicamente el hecho del confinamiento lo que aquí resulta relevante; si bien ello constituye el rasgo más llamativo, dado que nominalmente define el *tópos*, existen otros elementos que articulan la relación entre Madeline y Bertha, y que permiten, a su vez, establecer un vínculo significativo con Antonia.

El matiz inédito, coherente con la visión existencial de Maqroll, consiste en la desesperanza que se cierne sobre Antonia, y aún más sobre la pareja integrada por ella y el Gaviero. Ese fatalismo que regula toda relación humana, según la filosofía entre nihilista y estoica de Maqroll, implica que el antedicho encadenamiento de eventos, de escasa o nula interdependencia (la labor minera, el delirante llamado de Amirbar, las costumbres sexuales de la mujer), forme un conjunto orgánico orientado, de modo ineludible, al desastre.[13] Para este fin nefasto, retomando las palabras del Gaviero, "el azar" detrás de tales acontecimientos revela "un orden específico", si bien "oculto" e incomprensible (Mutis 2002a: 454), que arrastra

---

n'a pas manqué d'expliquer rationnellement l'une et l'autre […]. L'explication surnaturelle n'est donc que suggérée et il n'est pas nécessaire de l'accepter" (Todorov 2013: 45).

13   En una conferencia de 1965 en México, al presentar su visión acerca de la desesperanza, Mutis aclara que los que desesperan "han desechado la acción […] conociendo hasta sus más remotas y desastrosas consecuencias […]. Pero, [sin] una pasividad búdica, un renunciamiento ascético a participar en la vida" (Mutis 1985: 191).

a los dos amantes. Es por esto, como se observará en las páginas siguientes, que el imaginario gótico proporcionado por Madeline y Bertha se presenta, aquí en *Amirbar*, bajo una capa de melancolía adicional, de "deterioro".[14]

3. De la cripta al socavón

Como afirma Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, el de la "loca encerrada" es un auténtico *tópos* de la ficción gótica, y también "one of its most potent images" (Talairach-Vielmas 2016: 32). A partir de la doña Laurentini de *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (A. Radcliffe, 1794), que se retira a un convento y se aparece, como figura espectral, en los alrededores, numerosos personajes femeninos de lo gótico encajan en este paradigma. Pero, según la retrospectiva de la investigadora, es solo con la literatura victoriana que la "loca encerrada" adquiere un matiz expresamente patológico (36). Y aunque escrita por un autor estadounidense, pertenece sin duda al periodo victoriano la primera obra que se coteja con *Amirbar*. "The Fall of the House of Usher" es uno de los cuentos más célebres de Poe, que ha vuelto recientemente a la palestra crítica gracias a la – muy libre, y muy posmoderna – transposición televisiva producida por Netflix (M. Flanagan, 2023). Si bien las convergencias específicas entre Antonia y Madeline no son tan numerosas como las que se dan entre Antonia y Bertha, a lo largo de "The Fall of the House of Usher" destaca un elemento que también en *Amirbar* es imprescindible: la relación con el trasfondo, en este caso la decadente mansión Usher.

El cuento de Poe, en síntesis, describe la estancia del anónimo narrador y protagonista desde el inquieto Roderick, último de la casa Usher junto con su hermana Madeline. Ella sufre de una misteriosa enfermedad cataléptica que, en unos días de la llegada del narrador, la lleva – según Roderick – a la muerte. Ciertos comentarios del narrador, y de Roderick inclusive, hacen pensar sibilinamente que los hermanos pudieron ser amantes. Después de la sepultura de Madeline en la cripta de la familia, la ansiedad de Roderick crece vertiginosamente: cree oír algún vago ruido que procedería de las profundidades de la casa. En un clímax de tensión insostenible, las facultades mentales de Roderick, que ya estaban perjudicadas, se agotan. Cuando hasta el narrador se "contagia" de su angustia, finalmente se revela la fuente del sonido: "We have put her living in the tomb!", exclama Roderick unos instantes antes de que Madeline aparezca en el umbral del

---

[14]   Se trata de la palabra clave, y del mayor *Leitmotiv*, del fundamental ensayo de Hernández (1996) que ya se ha mencionado.

cuarto (Poe 2012: 527). Pronto la mujer, agonizante y temblorosa, se lanza contra Roderick en un acto enigmático, de venganza o, quizás, de extremo amor hacia el hermano, que muere de miedo. Fallecidos los dos, el narrador consigue huir de la mansión apenas en tiempo: de hecho, el edificio colapsa casi de inmediato. Circunstancia creíble de por sí, dado que la construcción presentaba una fisura, pero de una tempestividad al menos improbable.

Centrémonos en una de las reflexiones preliminares del protagonista:

> the entire [Usher] family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other – it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the 'House of Usher' – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion (510).

Es una anticipación de muchos temas del texto y, de alguna manera, también de su conclusión. En primer lugar, sobresalen las alusiones al incesto: "the direct line of descent", por ejemplo, así como la falta de "collateral issues, and the consequent undeviating transmission […] of the patrimony with the name". Pero, aún más, emerge ya la gran asociación que caracteriza el cuento, o sea, que la casa *es* – en sentido metafórico y literal – la familia, hasta el punto de que la mansión se derrumba exactamente cuando perecen Roderick y Madeline. A este respecto, el protagonista evidencia "the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people", y después la "equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher" – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion".

La inestabilidad emocional de Roderick, y tal vez la misma enfermedad de Madeline, parecen depender, de forma imperscrutable, de las características del edificio. En torno a la primera, el narrador afirma explícitamente que Roderick

> was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth – in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated – an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of

his family mansion had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit –
an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets […] had, at length, brought
about upon the morale of his existence (515).

Así las cosas, no solo la casa es, "biológicamente", la familia; también influye en
su psique, o la refleja. Asociación infecciosa, ya que incluso el protagonista, al
percibirse contagiado por una inquietud cercana a la de Roderick, imputa su
malestar a la mansión:

I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavored
to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the
gloomy furniture of the room – of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into
motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and from upon the walls,
and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed (522).

Correctamente, Jonathan Newell observa que es imposible separar los personajes
del trasfondo, y viceversa:

is the house reflecting and exteriorizing the madness of [the protagonist, and of]
Roderick and his sister, or is it actually causing their decline, as the story sometimes
hints? The tale continuously blurs the boundaries between characters and setting,
troubling conceptions of selfhood, agency, and humanness. The omnipresent imagery
of decomposition in the story […] suggests the mental breakdown of Roderick and
possibly the narrator […]. In their own diseased decline, the Ushers mirror the
decomposition of their hereditary mansion, house reflecting family and vice versa: the
Ushers bear the same monstrous decrepitude as their estate, while the house resembles
their emaciated features (Newell 2017: 77-79).

Sorprendente resulta la convergencia con el "síndrome de la mina" de Maqroll,
que, en la práctica, es una especie de delirio animista.[15] Parafraseando el interrogativo
de Newell sobre la casa Usher, ¿son las galerías de Amirbar enajenadoras de por
sí, o es la perspectiva del Gaviero que las distorsiona? Y, volviendo a Antonia,

---

[15]   Se considera el animismo un motivo fantástico por lo menos a partir de "Das Unheimlich"
(1919), el reconocido ensayo de Sigmund Freud en torno a lo ominoso. Por ejemplo,
escribe Todorov: "Prenons "La Vénus d'Ille" de Mérimée [1837]. L'effet final (ou le point
culminant…) réside dans l'animation de la statue" (Todorov 2013: 80). Principalmente
pertenecen a ello autómatas que cobran vida y objetos más cotidianos que se animan, pero
también lugares provistos de alguna "conciencia". La misma mina maldita, por cierto, es una
ambientación intrínsecamente funcional a lo fantástico: piénsese, en concreto, a *Les Indes
noires* (J. Verne, 1877). De hecho, como subraya Robert Miles, la "haunted cavern" destaca
ya entre los trasfondos característicos del primer gótico (Miles 2002: 41).

¿existe algún lazo entre el contexto hipogeo, su "perversión" erótica y su arrebato homicida, o tal conexión se debe solo al punto de vista de Maqroll? En cuanto a *Amirbar*, ya se conocen las respuestas: es la fantasía perturbada del Gaviero la que lo lleva a imaginar que una entidad del subsuelo preside el ritual bipartito de la extracción y del amor con Antonia; después, su conservadurismo lo convence de que la forma de este último es la causa del rapto.

Por el contrario, nunca se podría contestar con la misma certidumbre a la pregunta original de Newell. Véase, por ejemplo, la probable relación incestuosa de los hermanos Usher, y por tanto la sexualidad anómala de Madeline.[16] Siguiendo de nuevo la lectura de Newell, acaso haya un nexo entre la casa-familia y el carácter incestuoso de ella y Roderick; o sea que quizás, de manera obviamente imperscrutable e inverosímil, el edificio se alimente de esa misma tendencia endógama, y a su vez la refuerce.

Este vínculo simbiótico que – presunta o concretamente – une a los personajes con el escenario respalda las analogías entre Antonia y Madeline. En primer lugar, ambas están encerradas vivas. Como se ha mencionado, Antonia está enclaustrada antes en los socavones, si bien por su propia voluntad, y luego, al final, en un manicomio. La segunda, Madeline, se halla en un ataúd en la cripta de la familia. Es de examinar, además, cómo Poe representa el sótano de casa Usher: "lying, *at great depth*, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment" (Poe 2012: 520; cursivas mías). Allí está sepultada Madeline, por lo menos hasta su salida del sarcófago. La cripta constituye, con toda seguridad, la inspiración real para el cuadro de Roderick que se describe en las páginas anteriores: "A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or *tunnel* [...]. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at *an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth*" (517; cursivas mías). Hiperbólicamente, el subterráneo de casa Usher se transforma en una gruta, no tan diferente de la mina de Amirbar.

---

16 En realidad, nunca en el texto se declara abiertamente esta relación incestuosa. Además del comentario del narrador, el único elemento que la sugiere con decisión es una línea sibilina de Roderick sobre ciertas simpatías "of a scarcely intelligible nature [that] had always existed between them" (Poe 2012: 522). De todas maneras, muchos investigadores la dan por sentado: véase, entre otros, Wilson (1982: 157) y Hoffman (1998: 296-297). Menos de cincuenta años después de "The Fall of the House of Usher", se publicó uno de los primeros estudios clínicos en torno a las patologías sexuales, el cual se ocupa también del incesto: *Psychopathia Sexualis* (R. Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, 1886).

Por último, Antonia y Madeline comparten el detalle visual y fantasmático de la ropa de color blanco, que solo se menciona justo unos momentos antes de su respectiva agresión, en orden, a Maqroll y a Roderick. Para Antonia, se trata genéricamente de su "forma blanca" (Mutis 2002a: 479), mientras que, de Madeline, se citan su "enshrouded figure" y sus "white robes" (Poe 2012: 527).

En cambio, muy diversa resulta la manera con que atacan al amante. Pese a que tanto Antonia como Madeline actúen en la cumbre de la tensión y fuera de sus propias "cárceles", o sea, la mina y el ataúd, el gesto de la primera es puramente de revancha; el de la segunda, al contrario, es indescifrable:

> For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated (527-528).

Parafraseando a Leslie Fiedler en *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Madeline "returns from the grave to claim her brother just as [the two of them have], almost equally, feared and desired" (Fiedler 1975: 415). Aunque es más plausible interpretar también esto como una venganza, queda cierta ambigüedad sobre la verdadera intención de la mujer.

En comparación con Madeline y el espantoso desenlace de su historia, Antonia muestra aquel "deterioro" que se mencionaba antes. Al final de *Amirbar*, por ejemplo, frecuente y abiertamente se la califica de "loca";[17] de hecho, después del intento de quemar vivo al Gaviero, ella asalta incluso a otros personajes con furia ciega: "[d]eliraba [y] atacaba a la gente y no reconocía a nadie. "[A Dora Estela estaba] dirigiéndole frases sin sentido cuando tomó una botella de cerveza que estaba en una mesa, la rompió contra el borde de metal y se le fue encima" (481). Es un envilecimiento de su figura que nunca se percibe en Madeline, especialmente en la escena conclusiva de "The Fall of the House of Usher". Siniestra desde su primera aparición, cuando el protagonista la vislumbra de pasada casi como al flotar en el aire, Madeline conserva siempre ese rasgo entre enfermo y espectral. En el mundo del Gaviero, rara vez se encuentran a individuos tan próximos a lo ultramundano: lo más corriente es que todo se vea envuelto en una ruina inevitable, pero absolutamente terrenal.

---

17   Por ejemplo, doña Claudia, un personaje secundario, cuenta: "Por aquí pasó […] la loca esa hablando barbaridades y diciendo que usted había muerto entre las llamas. No se le entendía muy bien" (Mutis 2002a: 480).

4. Del desván a la mina

Bertha Mason de *Jane Eyre* es, por antonomasia, la "loca del desván". Como tiene un papel más bien reducido en términos cuantitativos, no parece necesario un resumen de todo el texto para el cotejo con Antonia; enfoquémonos, pues, en ella. Bertha es la primera esposa del coprotagonista de *Jane Eyre* y señor de la mansión de Thornfield, Edward Rochester. Jamaicana criolla, sufre de cierta condición nerviosa, supuestamente heredada de su madre, que le ocasionaría una sexualidad exuberante y, aún más, una actitud agresiva general. El mismo Rochester, vuelto con ella a Inglaterra, pero incapaz de controlarla, la oculta en un cuarto de Thornfield. Aquí Bertha se convierte en una furiosa prisionera que, cuando consigue librarse de su guardia, una sirvienta alcohólica, vaga por los pasillos de la mansión. Entre gritos e injurias, ataca a su propio hermano, agrede a Rochester, espanta a Jane Eyre, que solo en la segunda mitad de la novela descubre su identidad, y, al final, quema Thornfield para luego suicidarse.

Numerosas, y también profundas, son las convergencias entre Antonia y Bertha. Más allá del encierro, que sí es fundamental, pero que llevaría a consideraciones muy cercanas a aquellas propuestas en el capítulo anterior, cabe empezar por su respectiva descripción física. Obsérvese la de Antonia: una "mujer alta, desgreñada, con el rostro desfigurado por el cansancio" y "un moño denso de color negro"; dotada de "fuerza y robustez", y de una "solidez de los miembros [que] la hacía parecer más corpulenta de lo que era en realidad"; finalmente, se caracteriza por el "exotismo de [sus] facciones", o sea, por rasgos somáticos distintivos de la región de la cordillera (Mutis 2002a: 461-462). En suma, Antonia es una mujer vigorosa, y precisamente por esto trabaja muy bien en la mina. Aun de Bertha se evidencia, en primer lugar, que es "tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back" (Brontë 1974: 267).[18] Su cara, además, es "discoloured" y "savage" (267). En las páginas siguientes, cuando se desvela su secreto, Jane la ve nuevamente con una mecha de "dark, grizzled hair, wild as mane", y su "purple face" (276-277). Al luchar contra Rochester, que intenta calmarla por las malas, ella se revela "a big woman, in statute almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest" (277). Para Antonia y Bertha, entonces, resultan semejantes las facciones "otras", por lo menos según la perspectiva de Maqroll y Rochester, al ser la primera andina y la

---

[18]   De paso, es de notar que también Bertha, después de Madeline, viste de manera fantasmática ropa blanca: "I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight" (267).

segunda caribeña; el rostro desgastado o animalesco, y el pelo negro y greñudo; la talla, ya que ambas son altas y robustas, hasta igualar la fuerza de sus amantes, tanto en el trabajo minero como en la mera lucha.

Desde luego, en comparación con la vaguedad espectral de Madeline, Bertha es un personaje mucho más construido. No solo se trata de la mayor antagonista de la novela, dado que obstaculiza el matrimonio de Jane con Rochester e, incluso, intenta quemar vivo al señor de Thornfield (lo que representa otra analogía con Antonia); ya antes de enloquecer irremediablemente, y por tanto de quedar encerrada viva, Bertha desafía la respetabilidad y el poder de su marido.[19] Escandalosas son justo las costumbres eróticas de la mujer, junto con una general actitud violenta. Aunque no se explica de cuál específica "desviación" sufra Bertha, Rochester insiste en su lujuria. Por ejemplo:

> I lived with that woman upstairs four years, and before that time she had tried me indeed: her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; *her vices sprang up fast and rank: they were so strong*, only cruelty could check them, and I would not use cruelty. What a pigmy intellect she had, and *what giant propensities*! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me! Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once *intemperate and unchaste* (Brontë 1974: 289; cursivas mías).

El pudor *gentry* de Rochester hace que su testimonio permanezca deliberadamente impreciso. Sin embargo, entre líneas, se entiende que probablemente la sexualidad de Bertha lo perturba, en particular, en términos de intensidad; que acaso él se percibía como derribado del tradicional rol activo masculino, en la intimidad, por ese fervor de su primera esposa.

Agudamente Laurence Lerner subraya, al compendiar algunas reflexiones críticas acerca de Bertha, que ella "represents the bestiality of purely physical lust", "a live symbol of the dangers of madly uncontrolled sexual feeling" (Lerner 1989: 274-275). Como ocurre con Antonia, también en el caso de Bertha el erotismo descontrolado y la alienación violenta van a la par, pese a que el nexo causal entre estos fenómenos aparezca claro solo para Maqroll y Rochester. Los dos aplican

---

[19]   Según Gilbert y Gubar, Bertha is "Jane's truest and darkest double": su deseo de venganza contra Rochester sería el mismo de la protagonista (Gilbert – Gubar 2000: 333). Si bien se trata de una interpretación interesante, y legitima hasta cierto punto, correctamente Lori Pollock evidencia que esta lectura subestima mucho a Bertha, privándola de la dignidad de personaje independiente (Pollock 1996: 252-253).

a tales conductas el sofisma *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: así, una simple relación de contigüidad se transforma en un sistema orgánico, donde toda heterodoxia encaja con las demás, generándolas o, alternativamente, siendo generada por ellas. Con mayor razón, entonces, la "diagnosis" final del Gaviero, de que la "demencia [de Antonia] debió germinar pausada y sordamente a través de sus […] desvíos eróticos practicados con obsesiva aplicación" (Mutis 2002a: 488), parece un calco léxico de Rochester, cuando este último afirma, en torno a Bertha: "her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (Brontë 1974: 290). Es la correspondencia textual más precisa y, por consiguiente, la más sólida en un sentido filológico.

El discurso protomédico de Rochester encaja perfectamente en la mentalidad victoriana, y, más en general, en la del siglo xix. De hecho, como afirma Michel Foucault en un famoso ensayo acerca de la historia de la sexualidad,

> [l]a société "bourgeoise" du xixe siècle, la nôtre encore sans doute, est une société de la perversion éclatante et éclatée […]. La croissance des perversions [est] le produit réel de l'interférence d'un type de pouvoir sur les corps et leurs plaisirs. Il se peut que l'Occident n'ait pas été capable d'inventer des plaisirs nouveaux, et sans doute n'a-t-il pas découvert de vices inédits. Mais il a défini de nouvelles règles au jeu des pouvoirs et des plaisirs : le visage figé des perversions s'y est dessiné (Foucault 1976: 64-66).

O sea que, por una necesidad entre taxonómica y preceptiva, la ciencia clínica de esta época respalda la invención de la anormalidad sexual al examinar, clasificar y tachar las "perversiones".

Lo que sorprende es que incluso un hombre del siglo xx como Maqroll, a su manera cosmopolita y – por lo menos desde algunos puntos de vista – éticamente muy laxo, adopte igual perspectiva discriminatoria. Esto asombra todavía más si se considera, de modo algo burdo, que el Gaviero debería apreciar exactamente las tendencias eróticas de Antonia, y justo porque excluyen el embarazo. Vale recordar que Maqroll, que por su índole siempre "niega toda orilla" (Mutis 2002b: 103), quiere abandonar a Antonia precisamente cuando la mujer empieza a enamorarse hasta el punto de desear tener hijos suyos. Aun así, la orientación del Gaviero hacia la sodomía resulta doble desde el momento en que principia esta práctica con Antonia: le gusta, ya que queda obsesionado, pero al mismo tiempo la juzga "irregular" (Mutis 2002a: 469), como poco. Resultaría engañoso hipotetizar por qué, y plausiblemente llevaría a "psicologismos" no tan diferentes de aquellos de Maqroll, muy superficiales, sobre Antonia. Quizás, como comenta Alexis Uscátegui Narváez, el Gaviero tenga miedo a tal "consumo de la energía

[…] humana al borde del desperdicio, [a] ese gasto innecesario de los recursos humanos y materiales que [Georges] Bataille considera dentro de su filosofía como […] improductivo" (Uscátegui Narváez 2014: 30).[20] Sin embargo, esta lectura no es totalmente persuasiva: el que desespera, como Maqroll, sabe bien que toda acción humana se revela infructuosa, y merece la pena solo "para ahuyentar el tedio y nuestra propia muerte" (Mutis 2002b: 82). Por lo tanto, para él la vida consiste, en última instancia, en gasto y desperdicio, que son lo que persiste – según las palabras de una entrevista con Mutis – tras efímeras "plenitudes […] sin afeites, maquillajes o engaños" (García Aguilar 1993: 22-23).

Volviendo a Bertha y Antonia, también sobresalen algunas convergencias en cuanto a su estallido de violencia, esa cumbre del clímax de tensión que, para Savoy, caracteriza la literatura gótica.[21] La agresividad de las mujeres no es solo física, sino verbal inclusive. En torno a Bertha, de hecho, se insiste más detalladamente en su lenguaje soez que en su comportamiento inmoral: "my ears", refiere Rochester, "were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out; wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language! – no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary" (Brontë 1974: 291). Nótese que Rochester, indignado e inquietado, alude de nuevo a la sexualidad. La forma es hiperbólica: ni siquiera una prostituta pronunciaría las palabras de Bertha, lo que significa que su obscenidad excede cualquier sordidez conocida. De cierta lógica, entonces, ella deja de parecer humana. Prescindiendo del manifiesto racismo de Rochester, algo ajeno a Maqroll, es de evidenciar que Bertha, a nivel retórico, se transforma en un demonio ("demon-hate"): Rochester está describiendo una escena en la que Bertha "solo" le chilla insultos ("she […] mingled my name with such a tone […] with such a language!"), relacionados tal vez con la intimidad; esto es suficiente para que la criolla se convierta en un animal monstruoso y lascivo, en una especie de vampira enconosa.[22]

---

[20]   La referencia de Uscátegui Narváez a Bataille se dirige, más específicamente, a *La part maudite* (1949) y, sobre todo, a *L'erotisme* (1957).

[21]   Véase de nuevo Savoy (2002: 168).

[22]   Hay que reiterarlo: en su totalidad, nunca *Jane Eyre* podría considerarse una novela gótica. Pero, al mismo tiempo, Bertha es un llamativo elemento gótico al interior de este *Bildungsroman*. En sus primeras manifestaciones, ella parece a Jane una fantasma que vaga por Thornfield; después, una vampira: "Shall I tell you of what it reminded me? […] Of [the] Vampyre" (268). Esto acaece también porque, anteriormente, Bertha había agredido a su hermano chupándole la sangre. Cuenta Richard Mason: "She sucked the blood: she said she'd drain my heart" (199).

Ofensivo es también el brote verbal de Antonia. Gritando "como una loca", ella habla así al Gaviero: "¡Contigo hubiera tenido un hijo, pendejo! [...] ¡Muérete, animal! ¡El que no tiene casa que viva en el infierno!" (Mutis 2002a: 479). Es su anatema, que lanza mientras intenta darle fuego. Se trata, en general, de la línea más feroz que esté dirigida al Gaviero, y que no casualmente acompaña uno de los mayores peligros, para él, de toda la saga. En esta ocasión con cierta objetividad, dado que es poco plausible que Maqroll distorsione los hechos en sí, destaca otra demonización: a su vez, Antonia se transmuta en una bestia, salvaje e irracional.[23]

Las últimas coincidencias entre Bertha y Antonia tienen que ver con su piromanía, y pueden mencionarse rápidamente. Primero, Bertha intenta arder vivo a Rochester "in his bed"; luego, al principio del gran incendio que arrasa Thornfield, ella apunta a la cama que fue de Jane: "she kindled the bed there" (Brontë 1974: 406). Antonia, análogamente, trata de quemar al Gaviero vertiendo gasolina sobre su "cuerpo cubierto por las mantas" (Mutis 2002a: 479). Además del fuego como elemento destructor o, al menos, potencialmente mortal, resulta parecido el *modus operandi* de las mujeres, que atentan justo al símbolo de la intimidad: las camas de Rochester y Jane, en el caso de Bertha, y su sucedáneo en el de Antonia, o sea, las mantas de Maqroll.

La diferencia es, otra vez, coherente con la desesperanza que agobia al mundo del Gaviero y a sus habitantes. Centrémonos en la perspectiva de Bertha y Antonia: si la primera consigue por lo menos carbonizar la "prisión" de Thornfield, y desfigurar gravemente a Rochester, la segunda no logra cumplir su plan de venganza. Como muy a menudo ocurre en las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, Maqroll huye milagrosamente, haciendo fracasar la revancha. Es la misma maldición a la cual están condenados el Gaviero y todos sus proyectos, y que, como por transitividad, se cierne también sobre sus comprimarios, ya sean amigos o antagonistas: los miembros de la tripulación en *La Nieve del Almirante* mueren, ejecutados, suicidas o naufragados, y Flor, su amante, desaparece; Ilona, en *Ilona llega con la lluvia*, queda desmembrada por la explosión del barco Lepanto; Amparo María y otros ayudantes, en *Un bel morir* (1989), son matados por los guerrilleros; Abdul, amigo de toda la vida y verdadero protagonista de *Abdul Bashur, soñador de navíos* (1991), perece en un accidente aéreo.

En suma, triste se revela, por supuesto, el destino de Bertha, "raptada" de Jamaica y, por ser enferma, encerrada en un cuarto, lo que la enloquece de modo

---

23   Vale recordar, al respecto, el comentario de Ivanovici: "La *demoniza*, pues, esta [...] transgresión" (Ivanovici 2017: 26; cursivas mías).

definitivo. Sin embargo, es, con mayor precisión, desesperado el de Antonia, que se enamora y pierde el juicio por la frustración sentimental, fracasa en su voluntad homicida y, al final, acaba también recluida. Ambas son definidas locas,[24] pero, en comparación con Bertha, Antonia muestra de nuevo cierto deterioro (como se ha observado al confrontarla con Madeline). Bertha es una figura muy dramática que, aun en su desenlace de fuego, destrucción y muerte, siempre representa una alteridad casi absoluta: de hecho, se suicida entre gritos incomprehensibles. Antonia, en cambio, es "solo" otra víctima, si bien paroxística, del hado nefasto que amenaza a todo actor de la heptalogía de Maqroll. Trivializándola un poco, y pese a sus ilustres predecesoras, puede considerarse una especie de marioneta cuya trayectoria desborda incluso el realismo de su propia caracterización (rápida, vale recordarlo, es su caída en la locura). Un obstáculo más en la ruta del Gaviero, salpicada de desastres y marcada por la soledad.

5. A manera de conclusión

En una entrevista, Mutis afirma que "Antonia es una mujer con un mundo desviado, no porque tenga relaciones sodomitas […] sino porque creía en la historia de que cuando tuviera un hijo se iba a morir. Por ello, ella misma se condicionó a seguir un camino brutal" (Moreno Zerpa 1997: 15). Declaración que parece un distanciamiento del superficial análisis psicológico de Maqroll, de que el arrebato de Antonia fue debido a la sodomía, y, quizás, también una justificación del enloquecimiento tan repentino de ella.

Este no es el lugar adecuado para hacer más valoraciones estrictamente estéticas en torno al éxito de tal personaje, de cómo está construido; tampoco, con mayor razón, es la sede para hacer un juicio de intenciones sobre una supuesta actitud misógina de Maqroll que, a veces, podría vislumbrarse en la saga.[25] Volviendo

---

[24] En cuanto a Bertha, véase, por ejemplo, esta línea de Rochester: "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family" (Brontë 1974: 275).

[25] En resumidas cuentas, no se perciben muchas simpatías feministas ni en el ciclo, por parte del Gaviero, ni en las declaraciones extratextuales de Mutis. Maqroll tiene una miríada de romances; sin embargo, si a menudo sus amantes – como Antonia – desarrollan una dependencia hacia él, casi nunca ocurre lo contrario. Es más, de vez en cuando su perspectiva sobre la mujer oscila entre el sentimentalismo simplón y la cursilería. En cuanto a Mutis, cabe destacar que, a nivel público, el colombiano fue siempre y deliberadamente provocador en su conservadurismo: afirmaba ser partidario de la monarquía, y que la historia, para él, había dejado de resultar interesante después de la caída del Imperio bizantino; que nada le importaba de la sociedad latinoamericana contemporánea, y que

a la caracterización de Antonia, lo que sí emerge sin alguna duda es su unicidad, e incluso cierta inverosimilitud en su precipitada evolución negativa. Ni siquiera Larissa, que en *Ilona llega con la lluvia* mata a Ilona, exhibe semejante ímpetu; por añadidura, su alienación se articula de manera mucho más lenta y previsible.

En términos hipotéticos, exactamente esta singularidad sugiere *a fortiori* que Antonia sea un calco de figuras como Madeline y Bertha, y acaso justo de ellas. Este ensayo ha mostrado que, en efecto, hay muchas convergencias temáticas y – por lo menos – una coincidencia verbal que respaldan tal conjetura. Entre afinidades contextuales, en particular en el caso de Madeline, y descriptivas, especialmente en el de Bertha, y considerando, además, los denominadores comunes del confinamiento, de la "perversión" sexual y del estallido final de violencia, sobresale suficiente material como para legitimarla. Precisamente en relación con el estallido, y aunque nuestro trabajo no profundiza en esta vía, no deja de ser significativo que ese gesto extremo pueda entenderse como una forma de agentividad, y acaso como uno de los puntos de partida más sugerentes para futuras lecturas en clave feminista o desde una perspectiva de género; todo ello no solo en lo que concierne a *Amirbar*, sino también como herramienta para ampliar críticamente el alcance de la encerrada viva, aún anclada en gran medida en las tradiciones europea y estadounidense.

La intertextualidad, de hecho, es uno de los enfoques críticos más comunes para las *Empresas y tribulaciones*. Con respecto al protagonista, a menudo se interpreta al Gaviero como una versión paródica y posmoderna del Ulises homérico, del Marlow de Conrad o del viejo marinero de Coleridge, entre otros. Pero, si aún no son muchas, en general, las investigaciones acerca de los capítulos del ciclo siguientes a *La Nieve del Almirante*, así faltan todavía aportes comparativos acerca de los demás personajes.

En esta ocasión, se ha propuesto una lectura de Antonia a partir del *tópos* de la "loca del desván", subrayando así su filiación con lo gótico. Una veta subterránea, para retomar el tema del mundo hipogeo, que, como el más amplio paradigma fantástico en las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, de tanto en tanto asoma a lo largo de *Amirbar*: la atmósfera ominosa de los socavones (no importa que los presagios

---

rechazaba muchas de las nuevas corrientes literarias del siglo xx; que toda mujer posee, intrínsecamente, algo entre lo mágico, lo místico y lo telúrico. A pesar de todo esto, sería pretencioso tachar tanto a Mutis como al Gaviero de misóginos. En realidad, la actitud de ambos refleja un romanticismo algo anticuado e ingenuo. Acerca de las figuras femeninas en la saga, cf. López Castaño (2000); sobre Mutis y sus opiniones, véase de nuevo García Aguilar (1993).

sean solo imaginados por Maqroll), la voz de *amīr al-baḥr* y el perfil de Antonia evocan, además del motivo de la encerrada viva, los del animismo y de la mina maldita, típicos a su vez. Como la atención investigativa por lo fantástico en la heptalogía del Gaviero es reciente, ya que se remonta al ensayo de Ivanovici que se ha citado aquí, este artículo se inserta en un frente casi inédito, que aún mucho ha de proporcionar en cuanto a las descabelladas andanzas de Maqroll y de sus compañeros de viaje.

Finalmente, los ecos entre Antonia, Madeline y Bertha no solo iluminan aspectos inexplorados del retrato y del desarrollo de la coprotagonista de *Amirbar*, sino que incluso resaltan, en un sentido más extenso, la polifonía de las *Empresas y tribulaciones*. Ya sean dramatizadas o irónicas, "deterioradas" o paródicas, en la saga las alusiones a otras obras literarias no se limitan a la referencia culta y aislada; más bien, son elementos funcionales a la articulación de un discurso narrativo donde múltiples voces y tradiciones dialogan entre sí. Bajo el signo, obviamente, de la desesperanza. Al igual que ciertos personajes secundarios como Antonia participan de modo activo en este entramado, ampliando las posibilidades de lectura de las *Empresas y tribulaciones*, así la intertextualidad es un pilar esencial para nuevas oportunidades hermenéuticas en torno al Gaviero.

Referencias bibliográficas

Bibliografía primaria

Brontë, C.
    1974 *Jane Eyre*. Norwalk: The Heritage Press.
Mutis, A.
    2002a *Amirbar*. In: *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 401-506.
Poe, E.A.
    2012 "The Fall of the House of Usher". In: *Complete Works*. East Sussex: Delphi, 510-528.

Bibliografía secundaria

Barrero Fajardo, M.
    2012 *Maqroll y compañía*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.
Fiedler, L.
    1975 *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Stein and Day.
Foucault, M.
    1976 *Histoire de la sexualité. La volonté de savoir*. París: Gallimard.

Frow, J.

1990 "Intertextuality and Ontology". In: M. Worton; J. Still (eds.) *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 45-55.

García Aguilar, E.

1993 *Celebraciones y otros fantasmas. Una biografía intelectual de Álvaro Mutis*. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo.

Gilbert, S. – S. Gubar

2000 *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hernández, C.

1996 *Álvaro Mutis: una estética del deterioro*. Caracas: Monte Ávila.

Hernández, C.

2024 "Otra vez el tiempo te ha traído. Recordando a Álvaro Mutis en el centenario de su natalicio", *Estudios de Literatura Colombiana* 54, 173-185.

Hoffman, D.

1998 *Poe Poe Poe*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Ivanovici, V.

2017 "De cara al architexto. Álvaro Mutis y el realismo mágico", *Tópicos del Seminario* 38, 7-47.

Kavka, M.

2002 "The Gothic on Screen". In: J. Hogle (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 209-228.

Lerner, L.

1989 "Bertha and the Critics", *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44 (3), 273-300.

López Castaño, O.R.

2000 "Álvaro Mutis o de las mujeres en el ciclo de narraciones sobre el Gaviero", *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica* 51 (1), 89-105.

López, O.

2000 "*Amirbar*: o de las razones históricas del desencanto", *Estudios de Literatura Colombiana* 6, 81-99.

Miles, R.

2002 "The 1790s: the Effulgence of Gothic". In: J. Hogle (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 41-62.

Moreno Zerpa, J.J.

1997 "Maqroll el Gaviero, un peregrino elegido por los dioses: Entrevista con Mutis", *Espejo de paciencia* 3, 11-16.

Mutis, A.

1985 "La desesperanza". In: *Obras Literaria. Prosas*. Bogotá: Procultura, 189-203.

Mutis, A.

2002b *La Nieve del Almirante*. In: *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 9-114.

Newell, J.
    2017 *The Daemonology of Unplumbed Space: Weird Fiction, Disgust, and the Aesthetics of the Unthinkable*. The University of British Columbia, tesis de doctorado.

Nünning, A.
    2008 "Reconceptualizing the Theory, History and Generic Scope of Unreliable Narration: Towards a Synthesis of Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches". In: E. D'hoker; G. Martens (eds.) *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*. Berlín-Monaco-Múnich: De Gruyter, 29-76.

Pollock, L.
    1996 "(An)Other Politics of Reading *Jane Eyre*", *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 26 (3), 249-273.

Punter, D.
    2013 *The Literature of Terror. A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. New York-Oxon: Routledge.

Rodríguez Amaya, F.
    2000 *De MUTIS a Mutis. Para una ilícita lectura crítica de Maqroll el Gaviero*. Viareggio-Lucca: Baroni.

Savoy, E.
    2002 "The Rise of American Gothic". In: J. Hogle (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 167-188.

Talairach-Vielmas, L.
    2016 "Madwomen and Attics". In: A. Horner; S. Zlosnik (eds.) *Women and the Gothic*. Edimburgo: Edinburgh University Press, 31-45.

Todorov, T.
    2013 *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. París: Seuil.

Uscátegui Narváez, A.
    2014 "*Amirbar* desde El Erotismo y el Potlatch de Georges Bataille", *Agorá* 4, 26-30.

Wilson, J.D.
    1982 *The Romantic Heroic Ideal*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Zeppegno, G.
    2009 *La trasgressione fantastica. Infrazioni logiche e abissi di senso nella narrativa fantastica da Kafka a Cortázar*. Università di Trento, tesis de doctorado.

ALESSANDRO SECOMANDI

Università degli Studi di Bergamo
alessandro.secomandi@unibg.it
ORCID code: 0000-0002-4484-0656

LAURA TODESCHINI
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

The World Was All Before Them:
From Preservation to Reconfiguration
in Shelley's *The Last Man* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

ABSTRACT

This article traces shifting literary responses to environmental catastrophe and species extinction in *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood. Through the figures of Lionel Verney and Jimmy (aka Snowman), the novels reimagine the trope of the last man to reflect evolving conceptions of ecological crisis, subjectivity, and human-nonhuman relationality. Shelley's post-apocalyptic landscape emerges as an elegiac space of metaphysical solitude and symbolic ruins, while Atwood depicts a genetically reengineered biosphere shaped by techno-capitalist excess and biopolitical control. The article argues that the shift from Shelley's Romantic ecophobia to Atwood's posthuman eco-alienation marks a broader transformation in literary imaginaries of the future: from the sublime indifference to the hyper-mediated ecologies of the Anthropocene. Framed through the lens of *ecophobia*, the study explores how narration functions as a mechanism of cultural memory and symbolic resistance, recasting survival from a biological imperative into an act of linguistic and ethical persistence. Ultimately, the article seeks to demonstrate that Shelley and Atwood, despite their divergent aesthetics and temporal registers, converge in their portrayal of storytelling as a vital strategy for negotiating the disintegration of anthropocentric paradigms.

KEYWORDS: Mary Shelley, Margaret Atwood, *The Last Man*, *Oryx and Crake*, Apocalypse, ecophobia, ecological resistance, Anthropocene, posthumanism, ecocriticism

> Et cette journée était belle pour la décadence du monde
>
> J.B. Cousin de Grainville

1. Last men and beyond

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, European literature began to articulate visions of catastrophe that could no longer be confined within the boundaries of

myth and theology. A profound transformation emerged in the perception of time and nature: traditional frameworks for conceiving the end of the world began to dissolve, giving way to new configurations shaped by a secular and irreversible understanding of disappearance. For the first time, the death of the world became imaginable as a natural phenomenon, an outcome inscribed in the very fabric of matter itself.

It is within this pivotal moment that *Le Dernier Homme* (1805) by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville is situated. Widely regarded as one of the earliest manifestations of apocalyptic science fiction *avant la lettre* (Ransom 2014: 315), the novel unfolds as a poetic prose narrative depicting a world on the brink of terminal decline. Set in an exhausted environment and amidst the ruins of a collapsed civilization, the story centres on two human figures, Omégar and Sydérie, poised at the threshold of the final possibility of reproduction. Against the backdrop of a transfigured Paris, a city stripped of its historical and cultural coordinates and rendered into a spectral wasteland devoid of identity (Polegri 2024: 8), the novel constructs an imaginative tableau of ultimate extinction. In a world devoid of shared purposes and collective ideals, the protagonists' hesitation toward procreation signals a disjunction between the drive for biological survival and the potential for a meaningful, communal existence. Within this liminal space, where life has not yet entirely vanished but has ceased to signify, literature begins to reconceptualize the notion of erasure, no longer as a singular and absolute event, but as a sustained condition. Cousin de Grainville's prose poem anticipates the emergence of a distinctly apocalyptic literary mode, one that, over the following two centuries, would extensively elaborate representations of the last human being and contribute to the formation of a narrative tradition aligned within the broader apocalyptic imaginary of the 19th century.

In continuity with the anticipatory vision of *Le Dernier Homme*, *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley inherits and reworks many of the same existential anxieties, while articulating them through a distinctly altered register. Whereas Cousin de Grainville's text casts human extinction within an allegorical and theological framework, resonant with a still pre-Romantic sensibility, Shelley reimagines the same apocalyptic imaginary in secular and profoundly introspective terms[1]. The end envisioned in *The Last Man* no longer unfolds within the contours of

---

[1]   Shelley's novel emerges in the context of the author's emotional devastation following a series of personal losses, which left her feeling like "the last relic of a beloved race, [her] companions extinct before [her]" (Shelley in Paley 2008: vii-viii). Critics have frequently observed that *The Last Man* reflects Shelley's need to memorialize those she had lost,

eschatological theology; rather, it emerges as a catastrophe devoid of redemption, unfolding outside any providential design or promise of salvation (Paley 1989: 7). Despite the differing narrative form and discursive frameworks, the two works in question converge in their response to a shared imperative: to represent the crisis of the human in a world that has lost its orientation. This loss is not merely cosmological or biological; it is equally symbolic and political. The ruins traversed by Omégar and Sydérie, as well as by Lionel Verney, are not material remnants but also emblems of cultural collapse. Both works, albeit with varying intensity, reflect the disillusionment that followed the failure of the grand utopian visions of modernity, from the revolutionary promise of regeneration heralded by the French Revolution to the rational idea of progress championed by the Enlightenment. The disintegration of these salvific narratives, often imbued with millenarian, religious, or humanistic overtones, leaves behind a void that literature now seeks to inhabit.

Within this historical and symbolic rapture, *The Last Man* finds its place. Although set in a near future, the novel is shaped by anxieties of the post-Napoleonic era in which it was conceived. The extinction of humanity, brought about by a pandemic of unknown origin, unfolds under the sign of a pervasive melancholy, embodied in the narrative voice of Lionel Verney. As an isolated and introspective figure, Verney moves through the ruins of a civilization with a gaze suspended between memory and loss, encapsulating the profound uncertainty of his time. In contrast to Grainville's allegorical and collectivist framework, Shelley constructs her narrative around a fractured modern subjectivity, transforming catastrophe into an inward and perceptual experience. The choice of a solitary narrator serves not only to articulate the mourning for the end of the world, but also to critically interrogate the illusions of modern civilization: its faith in science, politics, and communal cohesion. In the face of total dissolution, it is the isolated consciousness that is left to bear alone the burden of meaning and memory.

The apocalyptic imaginary of the early 19th century was fuelled not only by the political and cultural traumas of the post-revolutionary period, but also by exceptional natural events that profoundly unsettled prevailing notions of human mastery over the physical world. Among these, the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815, on the island of Sumbawa (Indonesia), stands as a pivotal moment in the formation of early Romantic apocalyptic aesthetic and sensibilities. It was the

---

with the characters of Adrian and Raymond widely interpreted as literary transpositions of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, respectively (Mekler 2008: 74).

most powerful volcanic eruption recorded in modern history, with a Volcanic Explosivity Index of 7 and an estimated death toll of approximately 71,000 (Oppenheimer 2003: 249). The atmospheric consequences were global in scale: ash injected into the stratosphere triggered a dramatic decline in temperatures and widespread climatic disruption, setting off a cascade of famines and epidemics that affected large parts of the world. The year 1816, subsequently dubbed 'the year without a summer', quickly assumed a symbolic status in the collective perception of nature's volatility. The darkened skies and summer snowfalls generated a pervasive sense of dread, traces of which can be discerned through 19th century European literary culture.

Darkness (1816) by Lord Byron, written in the immediate aftermath of the eruption, perhaps most powerfully crystallizes this experience. The poem presents a world deprived of sunlight, plunged into perpetual darkness, and inhabited by human beings reduced to mere survival, descending into a state of barbarism. In this vision stripped of transcendence and devoid of any promise of redemption, humanity is offered neither salvation nor solace: its annihilation unfolds within cosmic silence, governed by an indifferent nature. The poem's conclusion gestures toward the figure of a last man, sealing the contours of a post-apocalyptic imaginary that was beginning to take shape. The motif of eternal darkness supplanting life and light would find further resonance in Thomas Campbell's *The Last Man* (1823)[2], where it emerges as a powerful emblem of existential finality. Though often relegated to the status of a mere literary curiosity, Campbell's poem, published only a few years before Shelley's novel, shared with *Darkness* the motif of an isolated subjectivity that endures beyond the end, constituting an additional element in the formation of a narrative trope that would become central to 20th century speculative literature. Indeed, by the early decades of the 19th century, the imaginary of collective extinction emerges with growing insistence across a range of artistic and literary productions. In addition to the previously cited works by Byron, Campbell, and Shelley, a variety of artistic productions can be identified under the title of the "Last Man". Although these

---

[2]   The question of influence between Lord Byron and Campbell's poems remains unsolved. Upon the publication of Campbell's The *Last Man* in *The New Monthly Magazine*, the author was promptly accused of plagiarism, with the work dismissed as a pale imitation of Byron's *Darkness*. In response, Campbell defended the originality of this inspiration, asserting that he shared the subject matter with another contemporary author, Barry Cornwall (Stafford 1994: 199-200). Nonetheless, the affinities between the texts appear to point less directly to textual dependence than to the emergence of a shared cultural atmosphere in which apocalyptic themes gained collective resonance.

narratives differ significantly in tone and purpose, ranging from elegiac melancholy to the grotesque, they nonetheless converge in their aesthetic engagement with the extinction of humanity: Thomas Lovell Beddoes' unfinished drama (1823-1825), Thomas Hood's satirical ballad (1826), a painting by John Martin (1826), and an anonymous fragment published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (1826) (Stafford 1994: 199). While anguish predominates in these works, John Keats' *To Autumn* (1820), composed only a few years later, responds to the same climatic context with an ostensibly more serene tone, though not without underlying disquiet. The poem's celebration of the harvest season and the cyclical rhythms of nature can be interpreted, considering the famines and meteorological upheavals of the preceding decade, as an attempt to restore a sense of order and continuity in the human-nature relationship (Bate 1996: 440). Yet even here, an awareness of transience, and thus of vulnerability, emerges, manifesting in the poem's delicate balance between vitality and decline.

In these various responses, nature ceases to function as a neutral backdrop or pliable resource. Instead, it assumes the characteristics of an autonomous, opaque, and unpredictable agent capable of abruptly overturning human order. The apocalyptic representations of this period thus signal a shift away from an anthropocentric worldview toward a decentered vision in which the foundational paradigms of progress, rationality, and control are critically unsettled. Catastrophe is no longer construed as the consequence of divine will or moral transgression, but rather as the outcome of material forces that elude human governance, rendering survival, and even meaning itself, profoundly uncertain. What emerges is a conception of nature no longer as an exploitable asset but as an active, volitional presence, untethered from any subservient role in relation to human survival or well-being. This reconfiguration of nature anticipates the emergence of a sensibility that, in contemporary terms, may be understood through the concept of *ecophobia*. This term extends beyond the mere expression of fear, encompassing a reactive and oppositional stance marked by the rejection of nature as an entity resistant to human control. According to Simon C. Estok (2009), ecophobia manifests as:

> [...] an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world [...]. It plays out in many spheres: it sustains the personal hygiene and cosmetics industries (which cite nature's "flaws" and "blemishes" as objects of their work); it supports city sanitation boards that issue fines seeking to keep out "pests" and "vermin" associated in municipal mentalities with long grass; it keeps beauticians and barbers in business; it is behind landscaped gardens and trimmed poodles in women's handbags on the Seoul subway system; it

is about power and control; it is what makes looting and plundering of animal and nonanimal resources possible. (208)

From this perspective, 19th century apocalyptic narratives should not be read merely as variations on the Romantic theme of decline, but rather as early indications of a latent ecological crisis. The trope of the last man is inextricably bound to this tension: the survival of a lone individual in a lifeless and hostile environment becomes an allegory for the failure of anthropocentrism, anticipating concerns that now fall squarely within the domain of ecocritical discourse.

This narrative lineage finds a compelling continuation in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy[3], particularly in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first volume of the saga, which reconfigures the image of the last man within a post-apocalyptic framework shaped by a human-induced mass extinction. In this context, ecophobia is expressed through a desire to reengineer nature via bioengineering – reducing it to a system that can be optimized according to functional and technocratic logics. The character of Crake, the novel's demiurgic scientist, embodies a Promethean impulse toward absolute control over the vegetal and animal realms, culminating in the creation of genetically modified life forms: the Crakers, designed to replace humanity and to ensure a purported ecological harmony. As in 19th century narratives, Atwood positions the survival of the last man, represented by Jimmy, also known as Snowman, as testimonial in function. He becomes both witness and archivist of the species' collapse, marked by the same existential solitude and sense of loss that define Lionel Verney. The connection between the two works unfolds not only at the thematic level of extinction, but also through their shared portrayal of a disillusioned subject, compelled to confront the consequences of a failed anthropology.

Scholarly engagement with Shelley's *The Last Man* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* has increasingly situated both texts within ecocritical, posthumanist, and narratological frameworks, reflecting their complex negotiations with environmental catastrophe, human isolation, and the dissolution of anthropocentric paradigms. Recent scholarship has foregrounded Shelley's use of theatricality as a critical lens through which the author interrogates the limits of Romantic utopianism, showing how her deployment of dramatic tropes stages a complex reflection on the instability of representation and the ethical

---

3   The *MaddAddam* trilogy comprises three volumes: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013).

possibilities of sympathy and collective affect in the face of historical catastrophe (Wagner-Lawlor 2002); alongside this, *The Last Man* has also been reassessed as an early intervention in climate-conscious literature, with critics reading the plague's atmospheric diffusion as a figurative anticipation of planetary crisis (Richardson 2019). Similarly, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* has attracted sustained critical interest as a paradigmatic example of speculative fiction engaging with the intersections of late capitalism, biotechnological intervention, and ecological collapse. Scholars have widely explored the novel's portrayal of corporate domination of the biosphere, situating the last man motif within broader cultural anxieties about environmental precarity and posthuman features (Cooke 2006; Hambuch 2013); further scholarship has examined how the narrative's doubled temporal structure maps onto the logic of trauma, framing the post-apocalyptic scenario as both a literal and psychological landscape in which personal and global catastrophes are mutually constitutive and recursively inscribed (Snyder 2011). Although some comparative studies have traced thematic continuities between the two works, these analyses tend to emphasize mythological and structural affinities without fully addressing the evolving affective regimes that underpin their representations of nature and extinction (Hunt 2023; Bender 2019; Mohr 2015). This article proposes a different approach by employing the concept of ecophobia, as theorized by Estok, as a critical framework for a diachronic reading of the last man trope in both texts. Ecophobia, understood as a culturally embedded aversion to the agency and unpredictability of the nonhuman world, allows for a reassessment of how Shelley and Atwood each stage environmental catastrophe not merely as a narrative event but as a disruption of ontological and epistemological boundaries.

Building on these premises, the present analysis examines how Shelley's *The Last Man* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* articulate, nearly two centuries apart, literary responses to the catastrophe and the disintegration of the human. By comparing the post-apocalyptic landscapes that frame each narrative, the essay underlines how both texts translate the rupture between civilization and nature, while tracing their respective cultural and ideological genealogies. Within this framework, the trajectories of the protagonists will be explored, with particular attention to the strategies through which the individual seeks to reinscribe meaning into a world emptied of coherence. Also, the role of storytelling will be taken into consideration as a critical space in which the human-environment relation is redefined: not merely as a record of disaster, but as a potential act of symbolic and imaginative construction.

2. Geographies of the Apocalypse: Abandonment and hostility

In Shelley's and Atwood's novels, the post-apocalyptic landscape operates less as a scenic background than as an epistemological framework through which the limits and conditions of representation are critically examined. The apocalyptic event erases the social context, generating a perceptual rupture that compels the last men to reconfigure the relationship between the human and the environment, language and memory, survival and narration. The scenes of destruction operate as a manifestation of both semiotic and ontological crisis, extending well beyond the bounds of mere sensationalist narrative. For both authors, the final frontier of apocalypse does not lie in the total annihilation of the Earth, but rather in the dismantling of the moral, political, symbolic, and aesthetic codes through which the world has traditionally been experienced and understood. While *The Last Man* and *Oryx and Crake* depict the collapse of human civilization as we continue to conceive it today, it is in the formal configuration of the apocalyptic text – its landscape, temporal experience, and emotional atmosphere – that a compelling vision of devastation emerges as immersive and transformative. The process of erosion to which the reader bears witness in these novels is initiated by a shared narrative catalyst: that of epidemic infection. In Shelley, an unspecified plague spreads with cosmic inevitability across the 21st and 22nd century; in Atwood, the setting shifts to a near-future scenario in which a bioengineered virus, deliberately released by Crake, eradicates *nearly* the entire human species[4]. In both cases, the infection infiltrates the protagonists' everyday reality, transfiguring the known world into a radically altered and increasingly hostile environment.

---

[4]   It is worth underscoring the structural and thematic interdependence between the first and second volumes of the *MaddAddam* trilogy – a connection that Atwood herself has emphasized on multiple occasions, referring to the two novels as "two chapters of the same book" (2011: 93). The transition from *Oryx and Crake* to *The Year of the Flood* marks a significant narrative shift, as the voice of the narrator bifurcates, revealing the survival of two other human characters, Toby and Ren. However, *Oryx and Crake* is conceived explicitly around the paradigm of the last man and engages directly with the existential implications associated with that figure. Atwood constructs the entire framework of the first volume around the radical isolation of its protagonist: at no point does Snowman encounter another verifiably human being, rendering his solitude absolute and thematically central. It is precisely this configuration – of total isolation, of testimonial burden and ontological liminality – that forms the foundation upon which the subsequent volumes elaborate and complicate the narrative. The layered perspectives and broader survival networks introduced in *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* do not undermine this initial premise, but rather expand upon it, offering a polyphonic meditation on extinction, memory, and the possibility of re-worlding.

Following a romantic logic, the epidemic in Shelley's novel unfolds with chaotic inevitability. There is no possibility of halting its advance or discerning its origins; humanity is rendered powerless in the face of an intangible force that corrodes all forms of organized life. As Kari E. Lokke underlines:

> Whereas most nineteenth-century versions of the "last man" theme represent the end of the human race at the hands of transcendent cosmic or divine forces that also destroy the earth itself, Shelley's humanity succumbs to the plague in the face of vigorous and blooming nature utterly indifferent to its fate. (2003: 117)

The resulting post-apocalyptic landscape is that of a hollowed-out Europe, where cities are transformed into silent necropolises and nature – no longer constrained by human activity – reclaims its dominance. The depictions of depopulated urban spaces, overrun by forests and wild animals, are suffused with pervasive melancholy, reflecting a disenchanted sensibility. In portraying Europe as a continent reduced to ruins, Shelley engages a principle that Olivia Sutton (2023) defines as "the emasculation of glory": the plague emerges as a blind and, crucially, anonymous force, devoid of moral purpose, and instrumental in dismantling the inherited structures of political and religious meaning:

> I entered with pleasure its wide and grassy streets. All, it is true, pictured the excess of desolation; yet I loved to find myself in those spots which had been the abode of my fellow creatures. I delighted to traverse street after street, to look up at all the tall houses, and repeat to myself, once they contained beings similar to myself – I was not always the wretch I am now. (455)

The ruins of cities such as London, Paris, Naples, Rome, Athens, and – in the cited passage – the Italian city of Forlì, no longer function as relics of the past; they foreshadow a disquieting horizon for the human condition, becoming emblems of a non-future. The landscape ceases to serve as an impregnable repository of memory, and instead becomes a symbol of the loss of all cultural and theological reference points. In Shelley's text, one can thus discern a form of architectural elegy that unfolds around the cities of the dead. The Europe that Verney traverses in the third volume of the novel is a landscape of absence. Human life endures only in its architectural remnants, traces that do not speak of destruction but of abandonment, generating, in the protagonist, a profound sense of estrangement.

> Mingled grass and corn grew in her plains, the unpruned vines threw their luxuriant branches around the elms. The grapes, overripe, had fallen on the ground, or hung purple, or burnished green, among the red and yellow leaves. (430)

And again:

> Winter has come again; and the gardens of Rome have lost their leaves – the sharp air comes over the Campagna, and has driven its brute inhabitants to take up their abode in the many dwellings of the deserted city – frost has suspended the gushing fountains – and Trevi has stilled her eternal music. I had made a rough calculation, aided by the stars, by which I endeavoured to ascertain the first day of the new year. In the out-worn age, the Sovereign Pontiff was used to go in solemn pomp, and mark the renewal of the year by driving a nail in the gate of the temple of Janus. On that day, I ascended St. Peter's, and carved on its topmost stone the aera 2100, last year of the world!
>
> My only companion was a dog, a shaggy fellow, half water and half shepherd's dog, whom I found tending sheep in the Campagna. (467)

This passage may be read as the culminating expression of the poetics of ruin that permeates Shelley's novel. The parallel between the traditional ritual of the Pontiff and Verney's self-appointed, iconoclastic gesture marks a transition from a codified and collective liturgy to a solitary and ironically despairing act of commemoration, one in which the subject suspends the renewal of time and instead marks its end: the last man's gesture, unlike the Pope's ritual affirmation of cyclical continuity in the Christian calendar, signals the closure of human history. The function of this deed is twofold: Shelley's elegiac sublime is never singular or pure, but instead oscillates between commemoration and erasure. Verney's perception is shaped by the semantic void that surrounds him: what strikes him is not ruin in its material dimension, but the collapse of meaning itself, the impossibility of assigning purpose, function, or destiny to space. Rome is no longer *caput mundi*, but the cradle of the sacred and imperial relic, emptied of its symbolic force. Urban ruins thus become the most conspicuous manifestation of historical suspension, where the linearity of time is disrupted. Shelley's plague is directly responsible for this rupture, foreclosing any possibility of collective redemption or utopian regeneration by unravelling the temporal continuum itself: the post-apocalyptic condition gives rise to an expanded and suspended temporality, unfolding into an oppressive, continuous present in which the very possibility of collective futurity is foreclosed. As a result, the last man inhabits a mode of survival devoid of agency, marked by a form of ontological stasis. His existence is reduced to a state of perpetual endurance.

Parallel to the melancholy trajectory of *The Last Man*, the post-apocalyptic landscape portrayed in *Oryx and Crake* emerges as the result of a violent and irretrievable reconfiguration. Whereas Shelley envisions a world in which the plague erases human presence while leaving the natural world largely intact, Atwood

constructs an environment in which nature itself has been genetically modified and exists inextricably linked to human intervention. Also, the devastation depicted in Atwood's work originates from the convergence of biogenetic technologies and capitalist logics, which have progressively transformed animal and plant life into marketable assets (DeFalco 2017: 434). The landscape she envisions takes the form of a hybrid ecosystem in constant flux, marked by a disquieting and paradoxical coexistence of technological remnants and transgenic life forms[5]:

> Also the rakunks were nuisance, scuffing through the leaves and sniffing at his toes, nosing around him as if he were already garbage; and one morning he'd woken to find three pigoons gazing in at him through the plastic. (38)

Urban collapse gives way to the unchecked proliferation of hybrid species – symbols of the irreversible contamination of natural systems. Whereas Shelley's nature offers symbolic refuge to Lionel Verney, Atwood presents a form of vegetation that is unstable in its essence, both generative and threatening:

> The buildings that didn't burn or explode are still standing, though the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs. Some kind of vine is growing everywhere, draping the windowsills, climbing in through the broken windows and up the bars and grillwork. Soon this district will be a thick tangle of vegetation. (221-222)

This can be defined as a "post-natural" environment shaped by a warped evolutionary process and marked by its resistance to containment or recuperation. Snowman wanders through a vegetation that demands not only physical adaptation but also epistemological renegotiation of the human's position in the world. In his solitary movement through this altered landscape, he witnesses how the remnants of the former civilization, advertisements, brand names, and consumer goods, persist only as incoherent and unreadable fragments, unintelligible to the Crakers[6] and, more broadly, to the newly emerging world:

---

[5]   *Oryx and Crake* contains numerous references to genetically engineered organisms, created through the combination of DNA from different animal species to produce new creatures with targeted traits. Among these are the *pigoons* (pigs designed for the cultivation of human organisms); the *rakunks* (hybrids between raccoons and skunks, developed as domesticated pets); and the *wolvogs* (wolf-dog crosses, engineered as security animals and rendered exceptionally dangerous by their behavioural design).

[6]   The Crakers, designed by Crake to be optimally adapted to the newly engineered ecosystem, embody the ultimate attempt to produce an improved species, one that purges of the traits

> Once the rain has slowed to a drizzle and the rumbles of thunder have receded, he slogs back to his cement-slab cache to collect the empty beer bottles. Then he makes his way to a jagged concrete overhang that was once part of a bridge. Beneath it there's a triangular orange sign with the black silhouette of a man shovelling. Men at Work, that used to mean. Strange to think of the endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind. (4445)

In this context, ruin no longer serves as evidence of human decline; it becomes the site of an ambiguous proliferation. Atwood's last man survives within a landscape that continues to reinvent – both formally and semantically – the conditions of habitation. For this reason, in *Oryx and Crake*, the loss of civilization is not mourned so much as met with a profound sense of powerlessness before a future in which the very disappearance of the human becomes an act of ecological resistance – an extreme form of care that is, paradoxically, profoundly unnatural. As Gerry Canavan argues, this ambivalence aligns closely with the logic of *deep ecology*[7] which, at its most radical, advocates for an ecological footprint so minimal that it borders on voluntary human extinction (2012: 150). In this light, the figure of the last man becomes entwined with a catastrophic but potentially redemptive vision, in which extinction itself is not an end but the only remaining gesture capable of interrupting capitalism's destructive momentum and reopening space for nonhuman life to flourish. Moreover, the process of environmental recovery offers Snowman no consolation, as it unfolds within a setting in which ontological hierarchies have been overturned, leaving the human subject as a semantic remnant, positioned at the periphery of the narrative.

Reconsidering the concept of ecophobia as articulated by Estok, the cultural aversion to the unpredictable demands of nature provides a compelling interpretative framework for understanding the metamorphosis of the apocalyptic landscape and its ideological function. In both texts, the destruction of humanity

---

the scientist deemed as responsible for the downfall of civilization: violence, hierarchical structures, environmental destruction etc.

[7]   Originating with the work of Arne Dekke Eide Næss (1989), deep ecology is an environmental philosophy that advocates a fundamental shift in human consciousness, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all living beings regardless of their utility to human needs. It calls for a deep restructuring of modern societies to align with ecological principles, promoting biocentric equality and recognition of the interconnectedness of all forms of life (also see Næss – Drengson – Devall 2008).

is not the sole trauma, but rather a pivotal rupture aimed at destabilizing anthropocentrism and the presumed supremacy of the human over the biosphere. From *The Last Man* to *Oryx and Crake*, the nature of this rupture evolves: while Shelley articulates an ontological form of ecophobia, Atwood's ecophobia emerges as systemic and posthuman, shaped as a critical response to neoliberal capitalist polices. In *The Last Man*, the plague appears to act without discernible motive or moral agenda, while representations of nature continue to convey a sense of unaltered majesty, almost sublime in its indifference to human fate. For this reason, Shelley's ecophobia operates on an existential level: the human subject is revealed as inherently fragile, unable to survive without the scaffolding of collective structures, and ultimately incapable of assimilating the implications of its own decentering within the broader logic of evolution.

> O happy earth, and happy inhabitants of earth! A stately palace has God built for you, O man! and worthy are you of dwelling! Behold the verdant carpet spread at your feet, and the azure canopy above; the fields of earth which generate and nurture all things, and the track of heaven, which contains and clasps all things. Now, at this evening hour, at the period of repose and reflection, methinks all hearts breathe one hymn of love and thanksgiving, and we, like priests of old on the mountain-tops, give a voice to their sentiment. (74-75)

This passage exposes the underlying enthusiasm of the anthropocentric worldview that regards nature as a divine gift destined for human use. Anticipating the modern ecological sensibility, Shelley's ecophobia emerges as a direct consequence of the unmasking of this illusion, assuming the contours of metaphysical solitude: natural beauty and order not only persist as humanity approaches extinction, but appear, paradoxically, to thrive in its absence. It is within this indifference that the sense of estrangement takes root, a defining feature of the Romantic form of fear directed toward the Other. The paradigm is preserved in Atwood, albeit in a revised form. Crake approaches the biosphere as a laboratory at his disposal and treats biology itself as a material subject to design:

> Every so often there's a more open space – the remains of a drive-in campsite, with picnic table and one of those outdoor-barbecue fireplaces, though nobody used them very much once it got so warm and began to rain every afternoon. He comes upon one now, fungi sprouting from the decaying table. Off to the side, from what is probably a glade where the tents and trailers used to be set up, he can hear laughter and singing, and shouts of admiration and encouragement.
>   There must be a mating going on, a rare-enough occasion among the people: Crake had worked out the numbers, and had decreed that once every three years

per female was more than enough. There'll be the standard quintuplet, four men and the woman in heat. Her condition will be obvious to all from the bright-blue colour of her buttocks and abdomen – a trick of variable pigmentation filched from the baboons, with a contribution from the expandable chromosphores of the octopus. As Crake used to say, *Think of an adaptation, any adaptation, and some animal somewhere will have thought of it first.* Since it's only the blue tissue and the pheromones released by it that stimulate the males, there's no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust; no more shadow between the desire and the act. (164-165)

As this passage reveals, Crake's genetic intervention directly impacts the intimate and social dimensions of sexuality and reproduction. The reproductive system designed for the Crakers, intended to eliminate inefficient emotions such as unrequited desire or jealousy, is the product of an extreme rationalization of life. In this framework, sexuality is no longer associated with affection or spontaneity but reduced to a biological mechanism activated by visual and chemical cues. The programmed control of the reproductive cycle, limited to one instance every three years per female, reflects the deliberate attempt to eliminate emotional unpredictability in favour of a planned, functional, and ultimately dehumanizing order. Although this system is framed as "natural" through its invocation of animal traits (such as those of baboons or octopuses), it is profoundly unnatural in its negation of the affective and cultural complexity that has historically accompanied human reproduction. The paradox lies in the fact that, in attempting to return to an imagined state of natural purity, Crake has devised a system that excludes precisely what renders reproduction human: desire, love, memory, and historicity. This vision evokes, albeit from an opposite perspective, *Le Dernier Homme* by Cousin de Grainville, in which reproduction is not controlled but rendered impossible. Humanity, condemned to extinction, is fated to sterility. In both cases, procreation becomes the object of conceptual manipulation that removes the generative act from the domain of free will and existential significance. Whereas in *Le Dernier Homme*, the end of fertility is portrayed as melancholic condemnation of humanity, in Atwood, reproduction itself is stripped of human meaning and transformed into a technical operation. Both worlds articulate the failure of humanity to manage its generative capacity responsibly: in Grainville, through resignation to extinction; in Atwood, through the illusion of posthuman perfection. In this sense, the controlled fertility of the Crakers is as dehumanizing as the terminal infertility portrayed in Grainville's proto-apocalyptic novel.

In *Oryx and Crake*, it becomes clear how the human downfall is the product of technological arrogance, and catastrophe becomes the expression of a technocratic, inverted ecophobia. As in *The Last Man*, the alterity of wilderness and the autonomy it asserts are categorically rejected. Nevertheless, despite its elegiac tone, Shelley's narrative preserves an idea of natural alterity capable of functioning as a moral mirror. Although profoundly isolated, Lionel Verney addresses nature as the witness to his fate: the sea, the mountains, and the surrounding vegetation are present as indifferent yet enduring symbols. In contrast, Atwood offers no trace of nostalgia for a lost and pristine nature. Its landscape is a semiotic swamp in which irretrievable cultural fragments are entangled with genetic artificialities. This composite environment exemplifies what Stacy Alaimo defines *trans-corporeality* (2010: 15), the ontological impossibility, fully realized in the *MaddAddam* universe, of separating human bodies from the material systems in which they are embedded. Snowman is contaminated, both physically and mentally, by this environment and is presented to the reader as the bearer of a residual body, a liminal subject compelled to negotiate his identity within a world that has erased all stable human referents. Yet Atwood's narrative takes this logic a step further: civilisation, having surrendered to excess, generates a form of bio-artificial life that ultimately proves just as uncontrollable. As Timothy Morton observes, within the context of the Anthropocene, the very opposition between humanity and its surroundings is rendered meaningless, as the constructed environment now exceeds and permeates the human subject (2016: 81). Within this framework, ecophobia emerges as the symbolic condition of a post-anthropocentric age, characterized by disorientation, alienation, and anxiety in the face of a world no longer governed by human laws or expectations.

Shelley and Atwood, though approaching the question from distinct historical and philosophical vantage points, converge in their critique of humanist ideology. In Shelley, the last man bears witness to human fragility against the backdrop of nature's immutable continuity; in Atwood, this figure – inflected with posthuman nuances – inhabits a chaotic environment shaped by centuries of ecophobic logic, in which the original concept of nature has become irretrievable. The evolution of the apocalyptic landscape from Shelley to Atwood reflects a radical transformation in ecophobic affect: from a fear of the sublime to a fear of the synthetic, from eco-anxiety to systemic eco-terror. In both authors, the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic landscape is not a mere stage for human action, but emerges as an active agent – a living, mutating, and opaque space that returns to humanity the tragic reflection of its own *hybris*.

3. The last word: Narrating the resistance

As previously noted, in the post-apocalyptic imaginaries of Shelley and Atwood, survival emerges as a deeply layered process in which the endurance of the last man is inextricably bound to the act of narration. Their protagonists confront the collapse of civilization through storytelling, seeking thereby to endow knowledge with a lasting form capable of withstanding the disintegration of social structures. Within the ontological misalignment that follows the apocalyptic rupture, the transmission of personal experience becomes a crucial gesture of resilience, reaffirming the role of narrative in preserving continuity.

Through the active labour of storytelling, both Verney and Snowman attempt to maintain a form of subjective coherence that mediates between traumatic experience and the fragile persistence of identity and memory. Their narratives expose a singular dimension of storytelling that presupposes an absolute solitude, a solitude that belongs not only to the isolated body, but also to their condition as subjects adrift in worlds stripped of semantic correspondence. Verney wanders through remnants of a still-recognizable past to reconstruct meaning. Snowman, by contrast, moves within a de-narrativized environment, attempting to establish communication with the Crakers, creatures devoid of collective memory, with whom the construction of a shared cultural legacy proves profoundly difficult, if not altogether unattainable.

Lisa Hopkins (2009) observes that the motivating principle behind Verney's narrative lies in the desire to leave behind a record of lived experience, despite the awareness that no actual audience may remain. In *The Last Man*, Shelley frames the last man's account as a secret history, discovered in the form of scattered pages within the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl. This framing device imparts a destabilizing structure to the novel, rendering the relationship between narrator and reader complex and ambiguous: it remains unclear whether what is being read constitutes history or prophecy, a formal ambiguity that unsettles any linear conception of time.

From the earliest pages, however, the text affirms the notion that memory might survive the end of humanity through the medium of writing. The hope that a "tender offspring of the re-born world" (437) might one day read these pages makes explicit the preservative function of Verney's narrative: writing becomes a gesture toward symbolic continuity in a world devoid of institutions and human presence. In this sense, Shelley's text functions as a kind of time capsule. Verney himself initially succumbs to despair, lamenting the futility of the undertaking:

> To read were futile – to write, vanity indeed. The earth, late wide circus for the display of dignified exploits, vast theatre for a magnificent drama, now presented a vacant space, an empty stage – for actor or spectator there was no longer aught to say or hear. (308)

Ultimately, however, the last man discovers in narration a form of consolation and testimony. His account reconstructs a lost humanity through the remembrance of emotional bonds, political upheavals, and personal griefs that would otherwise vanish with him. Writing thus becomes both a testament and an act of emotional resistance. In addressing an imagined reader, Verney bridges the gap between his solitary present and an uncertain future. Much like the ruined cities, the text functions as a reliquary of collective memory: having buried his wife, Verney symbolically buries his narrative as well, entrusting it to time in the hope that "eyes read these pages." (437).

Turning to *Oryx and Crake*, language becomes flexible, performative, and continually reinvented through an oral, mythopoeic mode that responds to the trauma of transformed subjectivity. Snowman narrates the aftermath of civilization in the present tense, while simultaneously recalling the world that preceded its collapse. In her analysis of language in the first volume of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Mundler observes that:

> certain phrases [...] echo the older text eerily: "these are things from before", "before things got so serious"; "most of the bugs have now been ironed out. The language of "the time before is constantly played and redesigned in order at once to evoke and reject, to name and deny, setting up an ironic-parodic discourse with the "real", that is, the extratextual, world. A fresh battery of neologisms designates the new vision of America – Ultratext, CorpSecorps – while lists of obsolete words from "before" are elegiacally invoked. (2004: 90)

In this way, Atwood constructs a rift between the before and after, shifting language – as traditionally understood by humans, from a collective to a private register. The juxtaposition of archaic and newly invented terms creates a self-reflexive tension that challenges the stability of both linguistic meaning and narrative structure. This interplay foregrounds language as a constructed medium, simultaneously evoking the cultural loss of the pre-apocalyptic world and exposing the fragility of communication in a radically transformed posthuman context. Across both novels, the protagonists' narrative strategies in response to catastrophe reflect two divergent conceptions of time and history. Snowman acknowledges that language itself has nearly perished alongside humanity, leading him to fear a final semantic dispersion that would coincide with his own disappearance:

> But there was no longer any comfort in the words. There was nothing in them. It no longer delighted Jimmy to possess these small collections of letters that other people had forgotten about. It was like having his own baby teeth in a box (261).

From this perspective, the true turning point occurs when Snowman begins to reconceive narration as a social duty: the last man begins to invent mythologies and elaborates cosmogonies for the Crakers, thereby laying the foundation for a new symbolic order. As Parsons demonstrates, Jimmy comes to regard language as a tool for cultural continuity. Prior to rejoining the Crakers, Snowman resolves to "pass on all [his] words" (339) and to "leave them with a few words to remember" (366). Alone, he concedes, he cannot sustain the life of language; but within a community, he discovers a "renewed purpose in the acts of preservation offered by language" (Parson 2023: 6). Atwood thus reconfigures narration as a generative force essential to survival: Snowman must assume the roles of storyteller and educator in order to construct a symbolic framework amid the ruins. She extends this logic by intricately linking ecology and language, drawing a persistent parallel between species extinction and linguistic extinction.

A pivotal moment occurs in the nighttime scene where Snowman, cast in the role of a struck prophet, recounts to the Crakers the mythologized origins of Oryx and Crake. Within this reimagined narrative, Oryx emerges as a figure of compassion, Crake as one of destruction, and Snowman himself assumes the role of a retroactive prophet. Through the articulation of this narrated cosmogony, Snowman constructs for the Crakers a form of cultural and identity-based continuity, transmitting the moral legacies of a lost human past:

> The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake. He'd had to think of something. Get your story straight, keep it simple, don't falter: this used to be the expert advice given by lawyers to criminals in the dock. *Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk.* (96)

In this pseudo-Genesis account, Snowman constructs a foundational narrative to explain the structure of the post-apocalyptic world to the Crakers. The image of the "egg full of words" encapsulates the central theme of language as a rare and

potent resource, underscoring the essential role of storytelling in imbuing the new reality with meaning and structure. Atwood emphasizes that mythmaking becomes, for Snowman, his only survival strategy in the face of humanity's annihilation. He repeats ancient stories and revives obsolete words, finding comfort in preserving what seemed irrevocably lost. The fact that Crake failed to eradicate from the Crakers their intrinsic need for myth, religion, or art, despite the deliberate engineering of their minds, reveals that narrative and language are integral to the very condition of human survival. In this light, language emerges as an ethical device: through the stories, Oryx embodies compassion while Crake represents human culpability, thereby granting the nascent community a form of normative memory.

In both novels, narration functions as a means of maintaining symbolic continuity in the aftermath of annihilation. Shelley's narrator preserves the emotional and cultural residues of a vanished world, resisting the pull of oblivion. Verney's prose becomes an archive of humanity; even as he declares writing to be an act of vanity, he continues, paradoxically, to write. Snowman, by contrast, deploys storytelling to reconstruct social bonds and reinvent meaning. He generates myths so that the very fabric of the narrative itself becomes the scaffolding of a new posthuman society. *Oryx and Crake* presents Snowman's narration as a conscious ethical gesture. In the end, he comes to recognize that language outlives any individual life; by teaching and narrating, he hopes to endow his world with something of the richness humanity once possessed.

Conceptually, both Shelley and Atwood portray narration as a post-apocalyptic mnemonic apparatus. Language and storytelling become strategies of survival that are both ecological and cultural. As Parsons and Hopkins have shown, when human institutions collapse, narration serves as the medium through which new subjectivities are forged and the memories, along with the errors, of the old world are preserved. In *The Last Man*, narration becomes the preservation of a human "before", anchoring selfhood in the fragments of history. In *Oryx and Crake*, narration becomes transformation, enabling a transcendent "word man" to project identity into a horizon of tentative hope. In both cases, characters engage in storytelling as a means of constructing symbolic continuity. Ultimately, Shelley and Atwood attest the enduring power of narrative to preserve meaning in the face of love, loss, and existential threat. Language itself emerges as the final living organism, carrying human thought forward through the desolate wasteland.

References

Alaimo, S.
    2010 *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Atwood, M.
    2011 *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Talese Doubleday.

Atwood, M.
    2013 *MaddAddam.* London: Bloomsbury.

Atwood, M.
    2009 *The Year of the Flood.* New York: Talese Doubleday.

Atwood, M.
    2003 *Oryx and Crake.* New York: Talese Doubleday.

Bate, J.
    1996 "Living with the Weather", *Studies in Romanticism 35*(3): 431-447.

Bender, S.
    2019 "Just Popular Entertainment or Longing for a Posthuman Eden? The Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy", *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 5(2): 31-50.

Byron, G.G.
    1816 [2008] "Darkness". In: J.J. McGann (ed.) *Lord Byron: The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 272.

Campbell T. – Gilfillan G.
    1823 [1852] "The Last Man". In: *The complete poetical work of Thomas Campbell.* New York: Appleton, 86-87.

Canavan, G.
    2012 "Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood", *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* (23)2: 138-159.

Cooke, G.
    2006 "Technics and the Human at Zero-Hour: Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake", *Studies in Canadian Literature* (31)2: 105-125.

DeFalco A.
    2017 "MaddAddam, Biocapitalism, and Affective Things", *Contemporary Women's Writing* 11(3): 432-451.

Estok, S.C.
    2009 "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16(2): 203-225.

Grainville, J.-B.-F.-X.C.
    2002 [1805] *The Last Man.* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

Hambuch, D.

    2013 "Speculative Writing and Environmentalist Politics: Ecocritical Readings of Oryx and Crake and Der Schwarm", In *AWEJ: Arab World English Journal* Special Issue on Literature (1): 42-54.

Hunt E.M.

    2023 "Mary Shelley's The Last Man: Existentialism and IR meet the post-apocalyptic pandemic novel", *Review of International Studies* 49(5): 832-854.

Hopkins L.

    2009 "Memory at the End of History: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*", *Romanticism on the Net* 6 https://doi.org/10.7202/005746ar Accessed 2 April 2025.

Keats, J.

    1820 [1977] "To Autumn". In: J. Barnard (ed.) *The Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin Classics, 434-435.

Lokke, K.E.

    2003 "The Last Man", In: E. Schor (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 116-134.

Mekler, L.A.

    2008 "'Altered by a thousand distortions': Dream-Work in Mary Shelley's Early Novels", In: H. Bloom (ed.) *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 67-74.

Morton, T.

    2016 *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mohr, D.M.

    2015 "Eco-Dystopia and Biotechnology: Margaret Atwood. *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)", In: E. Voigts – A. Boller (eds.) *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse. Classics – New Tendencies – Model Interpretations*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 283-301.

Mundler, H.E.

    2004 "Heritage, Pseudo-Heritage and Survival in a Spurious Wor(l)d: Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 27(1): 89-98.

Næss, A.

    1989 *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Næss, A. – Drengson, A. – Devall, B.

    2008 *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Næss*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.

Oppenheimer, C.

    2003 "Climatic, environmental and human consequences of the largest known historic eruption: Tambora volcano (Indonesia) 1815", *Progress in Physical Geography* 27(2): 230-259.

Paley, M.D.

   1989 "Mary Shelley's The Last Man: Apocalypse without Millenium", *The Keats-Shelley Review* 4(1): 1-25.

Parsons, K.

   2023 "'What is toast?' Language and society in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake", *Textual Practice* 39(1): 1-14.

Polegri, E.

   2024 *Le Dernier Homme di Grainville: tradurre la visione.* Roma: Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza.

Ransom, A.J.

   2014 "The First Last Man: Cousin de Grainville's Le Dernier Homme", *Science Fiction Studies* 41(2): 314-340.

Richardson R.

   2019 "The Environmental Uncanny: Imagining the Anthropocene in Mary Shelley's The Last Man", *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 26(4): 1062-1083.

Shelley, M.

   1826 [2008] *The Last Man.* Ed. with an introduction by Paley, M. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.

Snyder, K.V.

   2011 "'Time to Go': the Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's 'Oryx and Crake'", *Studies in the Novel* (43)4: 470-489.

Stafford, F.J.

   1994 *The last of the race: the growth of a myth from Milton to Darwin.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sutton, O.

   2023 The Emasculation of Glory: Pestilence, Revolution, and Madness in Mary Shelley's The Last Man. *Copley Library Undergraduate Research Awards, 12.*

Wagner-Lawlor, J.A.

   2002 "Performing History, Performing Humanity in Mary Shelley's 'The Last Man'", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 42(2): 753-780.

LAURA TODESCHINI

Università degli Studi di Bergamo
laura.todeschini@unibg.it
ORCID code: 0009-0009-7907-2122

CHIARA LOCATELLI

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

Labyrinths of Memory in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*

Abstract

The essay explores the themes of memory, identity, and trauma in Susanna Clarke's novel *Piranesi* (2020) within the context of other postmodern and contemporary labyrinth narratives. As a singular space encompassing multiple forking paths, the labyrinth has offered postmodernity a stylistic paradigm for narratives that branch out to other texts, creating palimpsestic structures which may be explained in terms of Genette's theory of hypertextuality. When such a labyrinthine text takes on the form of a journal, its exploration comes to stand for the narrator's attempts to make sense of his own palimpsestic identity, made fragmentary by traumatic amnesia and the resulting loss of psychological continuity. The fantastic mode allows the novel to enact a metonymic shift between the exploration of space, the reading of text, and the reconstruction of personal identity through the process of remembering. The labyrinth becomes a spatialization of the protagonist's post-traumatic inner space and, through metonymy, of the contemporary western psyche's fraught relationship with memory.

Keywords: labyrinth, palimpsest, memory studies, trauma, inner space, hypertextuality, fantasy

1. Introduction

Susanna Clarke's 2020 novel *Piranesi* takes place in a world-spanning labyrinth reminiscent of the eponymous Italian artist's *Carceri d'Invenzione*, themselves artistic representations of the "labyrinthine architecture of the human soul" (Assmann 2011: 303). It follows the lonely inhabitant of this place as he deals with his own labyrinthine memories by trying to piece together an identity out of journal fragments. It wields the genre conventions of fantasy and detective fiction to contrast the exploration of a secondary world ruled by the cyclical patterns of rituals and seasons with the working-through of the narrator's past, only accessible through the repetitions of traumatic re-enactment. This essay aims to bring further

attention to the close relationship between the novel's use of its fantastic setting and its exploration of the protagonist's memory, identity, and trauma.

Piranesi's relationship to other bodies of text is crucial to this discussion. From its very title, the novel invites the reader to look for connections beyond the page, and even in scholarly analysis, it offers many interesting readings when considered as a palimpsest, a text "superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through" (Genette 1997: 399). Most existing research focuses at least in part on its hypertextual nature: the novel has been read as a response to the Neoplatonism of C.S. Lewis (Dugger 2021), as a postmodern twist on portal fantasy and fairy abduction narratives (Błaszkiewicz 2021), as commentary on the Wordsworthian ideal of the Romantic scientist (Sanders 2024). As Myśliwiec (2024: 108) puts it, "Through creative recycling of established literary solutions the author links the past with the present".

The workings of this "creative recycling" are deeply rooted in the postmodern tradition, following the stylistic paradigm of the labyrinth. *Piranesi* thus finds a point of comparison in other postmodern labyrinth narratives, such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), but especially the short fiction of Jorge Luis Borges. Clarke has openly acknowledged the novel's debt to Borges's work and especially to "The House of Asterion" and "The Library of Babel", most recently in the afterword to *The Wood at Midwinter* (Clarke 2024), but a more extensive comparative study is warranted: many of Borges's stories have dealt poignantly with themes of memory and trauma, developing an aesthetic of memory that recognises the subject's instability in dialogue with the past (Pakman 2007: 177), and Clarke's own treatment of the subject follows in his footsteps in terms of depth and nuance. The narrator's journals play an active role in his struggle with post-traumatic amnesia, and the House itself stands at an intersection of several metaphors of memory. The novel's use of the fantastic mode allows these metaphors to come to life, turning the labyrinth of *Piranesi* into a spatialization of the protagonist's post-traumatic inner space and, through metonymy, of the contemporary western psyche's fraught relationship with memory.

2. The labyrinthine model and the palimpsest of hypertextuality

The "labyrinthine model of narrative structure" constitutes "a distinctive sign of writing, reading, and thinking in our era" (Faris 1988: 2). This model often manifests in an interpretive structure characterised by "forking paths", what Eco calls

an "open work" (Faris 1988: 10; see Eco 2004: 120-121) where the reader takes on an active role in the construction of meaning. The most extreme examples are works of ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997: 1) such as *House of Leaves*, a "techno-text" (Hayles 2002: 794) demanding to be physically explored by flipping back and forth through meandering footnotes, appendices and multiple layers of narration unexpectedly intruding into each other. In their organization, such works come to resemble the hypertext fiction of the late Twentieth century: "a rhetorical form having multiple reading paths, chunked text, and a linking mechanism connecting the chunks" (Hayles 2002: 795). Even in cases of linear storytelling, "the labyrinths of the novels match the labyrinths in the novels" (Faris 1988: 11). Is there a labyrinth to be found in the structure of *Piranesi*, then?

Clarke's novel is deceptively linear. It may be read in a few hours, with no need to skip pages or keep track of multiple narrators, and by the end the fabula reveals itself to be quite neatly closed. If there are any forks in its path, they lead outside of the book: literary allusions abound, taking the reader on a journey of inference through several genres, each shift creating a new interpretive meander. The novel may not be a hypertext in the ergodic sense described by Aarseth, but it can be argued that its hypertextual strategies (in the Genettian, palimpsestic sense)[1] serve the same purpose: creating an underlying network of interpretive paths for the reader to wander. These paths begin branching out at the very start of the novel, as the opening sections of *Piranesi* appeal to Borges's metaphysical musings, encouraging the reader to adopt the suspension of disbelief of the fantastic mode.

In Part I, the eponymous Piranesi paints a reverent "description of the World" (*Piranesi* 5), a labyrinthine House populated with Statues, and matter-of-factly presents his struggles to survive and catalogue it, exemplifying the "mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic" (Cuddon 2013: 417) typical of magic realism. This echoes both "The Library of Babel", where care is taken to describe how the inhabitants of a universe-spanning library perform their "physical necessities" (Borges 1999: 112) and dispose of the dead, and "The House of Asterion", where the myth of the Minotaur trapped in its labyrinth is subverted as the prisoner lovingly describes his House, which "is as big as the world – or

---

[1]   It must be noted that the primary textual relationship discussed here is architextuality, according to Genette's classification. However, as Genette himself notes, hypertextual cues serve to orient the reader's expectations towards an architextual body or literary genre (Genette 1997: 7).

rather, it *is* the world" (Borges 1999: 221). Similarities between *Piranesi* and "Asterion" abound at all levels, from characterisation, to stylistic choices, to the structure of their respective narrations. Anderson Imbert (1960: 35-36) argues that "Asterion" is a three-part riddle: the epigraph offers a key which may only be understood upon a second reading, the body piles up puzzling clues while avoiding any mention of labyrinths or Minotaurs, and the final lines reveal the solution.

Piranesi follows a similar pattern. The novel's epigraph directly quotes C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*. A character bears the surname Ketterley, the same as the titular Magician's, implying that the two may be related.[2] Piranesi describes one of the Statues lining the halls of his House as "a Faun […] He smiles slightly and presses his forefinger to his lips. […] I dreamt of him once; he was standing in a snowy forest and speaking to a female child" (16). The dream is, of course, an overt reference to an iconic scene in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Together with the increasingly-frequent appearance of extraneous words (a "biscuit box […] bears the legend, *Huntley Palmers* and *Family Circle*", 9; the years 2011 and 2012, 13; the London district of "Batter-Sea", 21), the Lewis references act as clues pointing the reader towards a different genre: portal fantasy, of which *The Lion* is an archetypal example (Mendlesohn 2008: xix). *Piranesi* may in fact be read as a portal fantasy starting *in medias res*, the narrator having lost the thread of his portal-quest to the point of forgetting it entirely. The accumulation of clues ends in a revelation: far from having mastered the labyrinth, the narrator is trapped inside, and must piece together the events that brought him there in order to find his way out.

The riddle-like structure and concern with the reconstruction of the past bring into focus a third genre: detective fiction, in which the labyrinth is a key metaphor (Shiloh 2011: 6). Borges is once again relevant: "The Garden of Forking Paths" frames a discussion of the labyrinthine nature of time within a spy story, and "Death and the Compass" may be described as an anti-detective story whose climax describes a "labyrinth that consists of a single straight line that is invisible and endless" (Borges 1999: 156). Faris (1988: 183) also argues that detective fiction shares structural analogies with labyrinths "in its use of different interpretations that branch out from one or more clues, and in its

---

[2]   Błaszkiewicz (2021: 114-116) and Dugger (2021: 64) note that *Piranesi*'s Val Ketterley and Lewis's Andrew Ketterley also share a role as "transgressive thinkers" (*Piranesi* 146) with a dangerous interest in the occult, furthering the connection.

emphasis on linear progression through a complicated and confusing but nonetheless predetermined itinerary".

This is, essentially, the topography of *Piranesi*: its hypertextual references are branches for the reader to explore, or rather meanders that complicate an otherwise-linear path. In Borges's "Garden" and "Death", much like in "Asterion", the text begins by anticipating the climax, letting the reader glimpse the solution to the mystery before the meandering deceptions begin. Similarly, the Lewis quote opening *Piranesi* obliquely reveals the House's nature as a portal world; the reference to Giambattista Piranesi in its very title suggests that the protagonist is trapped in an imaginary prison. The reader does not initially hold the keys to the riddle and so moves on, misled by the metaphysical meditations of the first few pages. But the inciting incident of *Piranesi*'s plot is the intrusion of a detective from the primary world, Sarah Raphael (initially known as "The Sixteenth Person"). The narrator turns out to have been a sort of detective all along: Matthew Rose Sorensen, an academic writer with an interest in transgressive thinkers, sequestered into the House by one of his research subjects, Val Ketterley, during an investigation.

This reconstruction process forces both narrator and reader to grapple with three overlapping timelines – a Borgesian labyrinth of time. The first covers Piranesi's life in the House and his investigation; the second follows Sorensen's past, before and after his imprisonment; the third concerns the thinkers who trapped him inside and their previous victims. Much like the characters and events in "Garden" mirror one another (see Rimmon-Kenan 1980), Sorensen's abduction by Ketterley is a repetition of James Ritter's abduction by Laurence Arne-Sayles, Ketterley's mentor and the first theorist of the House; and most importantly, Piranesi's piecing-together of his identity, ultimately leading to his exit from the House, is specular to Sorensen's journey into the House, culminating in his loss of identity. This allows *Piranesi*'s narrator to function as a double of himself. As the reader proceeds through journal entries penned at different points in time, they discover different perspectives, "each reflecting on the others in a typically post-modernist collage/polyphony of narrative voices" (Błaszkiewicz 2021: 127).

After the detective plot has reached its climax, with the re-emergence of Sorensen's identity and the discovery of Ketterley's crime, the interrupted portal-quest may resume and be resolved, as the narrator exits the House and returns to the primary world. But at the end of the novel, the reader is ultimately left with a nameless protagonist, who has rejected all of his previous identities

and has not yet chosen a new one for himself. Rather than providing the clean resolution traditionally required by portal-fantasy and detective fiction (return to the primary world; a solved case), *Piranesi* returns to the ambiguity of magic realism. At the end of "Garden", the protagonist muses that what happened after his contradictory act of murder is "unreal, insignificant" (Borges 1999: 127); in "Death", Lönnrot dies feeling "an impersonal, almost anonymous sadness" (Borges 1999: 156). *Piranesi*'s narrator seems to find at least temporary peace ("I felt calm", 244), but even as he returns to the primary world, he cannot let go of the House: "*I am not home. I am here*" (243). Discussing the novel's postmodern take on fairy abduction, Błaszkiewicz (2021: 129) concludes that "the fairyland which becomes a state of mind is significantly harder to conclusively abandon than would be the case with any form of physical incarceration". Upon a second reading, an early moment of revelation inevitably stands out:

> 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. (*Piranesi* 60)

This epiphany comes to Piranesi just before Detective Raphael's intrusion misleads him (and the reader) into trying to unravel the twin riddles of the House's nature and his lost identity. Solutions are offered for both, only to be rejected in favour of postmodern ambiguity. The House is a secondary world, but crossing a portal is not enough to leave it; the narrator may reconstruct his former life as Sorensen, but he cannot truly resume it. Portal-quest and detective fiction are, in the end, hypertextual meanders complicating a path that from the very beginning leads towards magic realism.

And yet, all three genres are there, underlying the text. By playing with hypertextual cues, Clarke invokes the Genettian palimpsest; and because the text is palimpsestic, its plot structure becomes labyrinthine. A palimpsest is, after all, a sort of textual labyrinth: as a three-dimensional space, its structure implies an inner "core" only accessible by navigating the outer layers that conceal it, an earlier text obscured by subsequent writings. Both images share an impression of depth and complexity, an overlap obvious in Neo-Victorian literature, where the urban environment is presented simultaneously as an architectural palimpsest of different cultures and ages, and as a labyrinth whose core becomes a site for encounters with the monstrous (Kohlke 2015). To understand just what monster lies in this textual labyrinth, we now turn to analysing *Piranesi*'s protagonist.

3. The palimpsest of memory and the Minotaur

As anticipated, the palimpsest is a highly polyvalent symbol, first brought into the realm of literary metaphor by Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (Dillon 2007: 1-10). His description of the human brain as a palimpsest upon which "Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen" (De Quincey 2019: 54), stored forever but inaccessible until brought back to the surface, represents a turning point in the conceptualisation of personal memory (Assmann 2011: 142). Genette employs it to explain transtextual relationships, allowing it to take on cultural significance: the dialogue between a hypertext and its hypotexts forges a close connection between different points in time, turning the palimpsest into a form of literary memory (see Nünning 2007: 571-573). Being both a two-dimensional medium for the recording of memory and a three-dimensional place where memory is stored (Assmann 2007: 517), the palimpsest may be employed as a logical key to interpret *Piranesi*, helping to illuminate the link between the text, the narrator's identity, and the labyrinth he inhabits.

Where *Piranesi* the novel may be read as a palimpsest of genres, its narrator's mind may be interpreted as a palimpsest in the style of De Quincey, communicated to the reader via stylistic cues in his self-writing. It would, however, be reductive to confine all discussion of memory in the novel to a singular image: Clarke incorporates multiple memory media into her narration, moving from writing, to photography, to archival imagery. The meeting-point among these different media is found in the narrator's journals, which may themselves be looked at as a palimpsest.

The word "palimpsest" itself never appears in the novel, and the journals' initial presentation seems to be that of a coherent whole, written in a style reminiscent of a Late Modern memoir. In full Enlightenment fashion, Piranesi states that writing is "a medium by which Reason can pass from one Person to another" (169) and a tool which "inculcates habits of precision and carefulness" (12), allowing him to describe, rationalise and catalogue the world around him. His method, as explained in the opening pages of the novel, is meticulous, making use of indexes and tables and weighing the merits of different dating systems. He presents himself as a rigorous scientist, though one enchanted with the nature he documents (Sanders 2024: 301): a man systematically exposing himself to the reader, baring his inner truth and rationally explaining his perspective.

Piranesi's writings are both a prosthesis and a metaphor of his narrative memory, a crucial tool of psychological continuity: in Lockian terms, they allow

his consciousness to extend "backwards to any past Action or Thought" (Yaffe 2007: 216), joining his memories together into a coherent identity. It is telling of his mental state that discrepancies and disruptions are almost immediately introduced to this supposed continuity. The first few journals follow the Earth's calendar, from December 2011 to November 2012 (13); subsequent volumes use a system of Piranesi's invention, naming years after notable events. By his own, perplexed admission, two competing systems "introduce confusion, uncertainty, doubt and muddle" (15), and he is unable to remember the reason for the sudden switch. More worryingly, some journals "have gaps where pages have been violently removed" (13). Piranesi begins the novel in a state of denial: he is on some level aware that something is wrong, recognising that "as far as I remember [Piranesi] is not my name" (9; the nickname was chosen by Ketterley, "a sort of joke", 163), but like Borges's Asterion he cannot acknowledge his status as prisoner. He is also oblivious to the gaps in his memory, candidly stating: "I remember everything" (22), "Nowhere is there any disjuncture where I ought to remember something but do not, where I ought to understand something but I do not" (71). Yet the removed pages do correspond to missing memories. When Piranesi comes across the torn journal scraps, he finds their content is fragmentary and unnerving: "minotaur", "slave", "kill him" (62). Even the handwriting is foreign to him, "atrocious – like a tangle of seaweed" (61-62). Piranesi initially lacks the tools to recognise or understand this intrusion of the past upon the present: this is the paradigm of trauma, an event too shocking to be integrated in self-narration and encrypted into the psyche as "disconnected fragments" (Assman 2011: 252).

Like his fragmented words, Sorensen's character still shows through in glimpses. His identity may be reconstructed from indexes and notes found by Piranesi while investigating the journals, and through other characters' descriptions of him. Though the two identities are sometimes contrasted ("I thought you sounded an arrogant little shit. […] But now… Charming. Quite charming", 93), many things that are true of Sorensen are also true of Piranesi. Sorensen's background as a mathematician explains why the narrator can compile complex tables to track and predict the flow of tides, even after forgetting what a university is. Likewise, his scholarly inclinations are reflected in Piranesi's admission that "the idea of writing a book appeals to […][him] strongly" (146), as well as their journaling habit and Piranesi's interest in cataloguing the wonders of the House. After returning to the primary world, the narrator remarks that Sorensen and Piranesi shared a love of clothing (238), making sense of Piranesi's anomalous insistence on describing Ketterley's menswear upon their every meeting. Detective Sarah

Raphael notes that Piranesi retains Sorensen's body language: "It's the way you raise your eyebrow at me. That dubious, rather imperious look" (223). In short, the identities of Sorensen and Piranesi are best understood as overlaying: they share habits, tastes and mannerisms. And yet, Piranesi is unable to retrieve recollections of Sorensen, only experiencing him as "an emptiness, a silence, an absence" (165).

Piranesi also fails to remember that Sorensen was the one to tear away the pages. This violent act is accompanied by a literal scraping of the palimpsest, as it also involves re-numbering some of the covers. He is only able to detect the alteration because "the scratching out had not been done perfectly […] and I could still make out the ghostly form" of missing numbers (105). Journals 1, 2, and 3, the first penned by Piranesi, are actually journals 21, 22, and 23 of Sorensen's collection: twenty volumes are entirely missing. The scraping of the journals is equated with a scraping of the mind, which has made the memories of the narrator's previous identity as Matthew Rose Sorensen at least temporarily irretrievable.

Where Piranesi's consciousness refuses to extend back in time through writing, photographic metaphors step in. The torn journal fragments (which, as established above, are yet-unintegrated traumatic memories) are found during a journey to a sort of *camera obscura*: the One-Hundred-and-Ninety-Second Western Hall is described as one of the few dark places in the House, with only a single narrow entrance through which light shines (58). Piranesi describes it as "full of Presence" (49); drawing on Roland Barthes's theories on photography, it may be understood as full of *Spectrum*, the simulacrum or residue of the photographed subject (Calzoni 2007a: 326). In the vivid stillness of this dark room, a crowd of images is suddenly illuminated: "for a moment I had an inkling of what it might be like if instead of two people in the World there were thousands" (59). In the Seventeenth century, Locke employed the *camera obscura* as a metaphor for the acquisition of knowledge (Yaffe 2007: 247), while undeveloped photographic plates have often been used to discuss memories which are temporarily unavailable, but nevertheless impressed upon the mind (Assmann 2011: 144-145). Here, the negatives of Sorensen's memories are suddenly developed into consciousness by the chemical reaction triggered by an uncanny experience.

But this is not enough. Piranesi's struggles may not be resolved without confrontation with his journals: rather than being the inert product of narrative memory, they take on an active role in the complex process of remembering. Piranesi's relationship to self-writing bears echoes of other uncanny encounters between narrators and their externalised memories. In *House of Leaves*, Johnny

Truant is left reeling by journals he does not remember writing; in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, the titular protagonist is dumbfounded by his recorded voice; in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, Leonard Shelby is led astray by the Polaroids he uses to mitigate his amnesia. All are cases of "an editor and reviser of his autobiographical records, who tries to make a synthesised self from the mechanically reproduced recorded voice by cutting and patching it up", thus revealing "the interaction between subjective recollections and the objective media which record them" (Iwata 2008: 34).

The best evidence of this interaction is found in the section titled "The Index" (102-108). Discovering the re-numbering of his journals, and thus old entries penned by Sorensen before the amnesia, triggers a crisis in Piranesi that forces him to confront and change his relationship to writing. This requires non-trivial effort:

> The strange thing was *so* strange, so entirely incomprehensible that I found it difficult to form coherent thoughts about it. I could see the strangeness with my eyes, but I could not think it with my mind. […] Nevertheless, I forced my eyes to see it; I forced my mind to think it. (103-104)

Initially, like Krapp in Beckett's polyphonic monologue, Piranesi fails to understand the version of himself mechanically reproduced in the journals. The attempt is frustrating, as only the reader is able to grasp the significance of what he finds:

> The words on the page – (in my own writing!) – looked like words, but at the same time I knew they were meaningless. It was nonsense, gibberish! What meaning could words such as 'Birmingham' and 'Perugia' possibly have? (108)

And like Shelby in *Memento*, the narrator's amnesia leads him to the wrong conclusion about the contents of his prosthetic memories, eroding his ability to tell truth from lies: "I must have been ill when I wrote those entries in my Journal or else I would not have filled them with outlandish words such as 'Birmingham' and 'Perugia'" (110).

Once Piranesi forces himself to confront them, the memories of Sorensen's life first emerge as ekphrastic descriptions of visual and auditory flashes, experienced without understanding:

> I begin to feel anxious again. A crowd of images stirs in my mind – strange, nightmarish, but at the same time oddly familiar. The word 'Birmingham', for example, brings with it a blare of noise, a flash of movement and colour and the fleeting image of towers and spires against a heavy grey sky. I try to catch hold of these impressions, to examine them further, but instantly they fade. (110)

These "nightmarish" yet "oddly familiar" (in one word: *unheimlich*, uncanny) flashes reoccur whenever the narrator is reminded of the world outside the House, and he describes them in psychopathological terms, as intrusive images "breaking through into consciousness" (108) after being triggered by reading his journals, a dangerous activity for his psychological continuity (112). Here and throughout the novel, the flashbacks are accompanied by the physical symptoms of a panic attack, like those typical of post-traumatic stress disorder: nausea, headaches, difficulty breathing.

Faced with the evidence that his narrative identity is a construct born of a selective, violent removal, Piranesi's first reaction is again denial. He thinks of getting rid of the journals, the physical simulacrum of his traumatised mind, and of going back to his previous illusion of perfect sanity and total recall. Like Shelby burning his Polaroids to escape his guilt in *Memento*, the narrator has already altered his prosthetic memory at least once, before the beginning of the novel, with the scraping of Sorensen from the palimpsest's surface. When the crisis repeats itself in "The Index", however, something has changed: Piranesi has found comfort in the House and resolves to take better care of himself, to begin working through his traumatic memories instead of repressing them again (109).

The House's role will be explored below. First, a clue to the journals' potential may be found in the narrator's description of the visions they trigger: in his words, they bring "madness or else understanding" (108). This is the awareness that allows him to begin processing his traumatic experience, presented as a literal and metaphorical piecing-together of the past. The torn pages are scattered in a faraway hall of the House, the numbers leave imprints that let him notice their absence: the fragments are retrievable, though the process is draining and painful. The middle section of the novel, devoted to this reconstruction under the guise of archival investigation, largely consists of Piranesi looking up entries on his journal index (see Bain 2021: 114-115). Where in Beckett's drama "the word and the experience are entirely lost to Krapp's mind when they appear in his ledger as fragmentary data" (Iwata 2008: 37), Piranesi is able to make his way through his memories by learning to re-cognise the logic of their indexer, his past self, and thus reconstruct a coherent narrative out of confusing fragments.

This process culminates in another revelatory moment in the form of writing: Part 5 of the novel is a long journal entry penned by Sorensen, pieced together from torn scraps, detailing his imprisonment at the hands of Ketterley. Reading it triggers a reaction more intense than any previous flashback: rather than photographs developing in a *camera obscura*, the more apt comparison here is the "phosphoric

radiance" which, according to De Quincey (2019: 55), reveals the hidden layers of a palimpsest. De Quincey and Piranesi describe the process in similar terms: to the former, memories "are not dead, but sleeping" (De Quincey 2019: 55), and to the latter, Sorensen "reposed in a state of unconsciousness somewhere inside […] [himself]" (*Piranesi* 190) until reading brings him back. The buried identity emerges with a cry of pain, before being soothed: "I placed my hand on my chest. *Hush now! I said, Do not be afraid. You are safe. Go back to sleep*" (191).

A crucial difference must however be pointed out. De Quincey depicts the retrieval of deeper layers as a magical process, a "fantasy of resurrection" (Dillon 2007: 24-26): bringing the past back to life, exactly as it was before being buried. But much like eighteenth-century chemical techniques, which were often more destructive than reconstructive of actual palimpsests (Dillon 2007: 20), the re-enactment of Sorensen's trauma is ineffective at bringing him back. Rather, reliving trauma is re-traumatising to Piranesi: "This is where I lost Myself. I lost Myself in long, sick fantasies of revenge" (189).

The only difference between the incident of Sorensen's erasure and the epiphany of his re-emergence is that, having pieced together his journals, Piranesi has found the words to narrate his trauma. The result is not the magical resurrection of a previous layer of the palimpsest, but rather the addition of a new top layer of identity. Piranesi is not violently removed as Sorensen was, but the narrator declares himself to be "not Piranesi – or at least not only him" (239). Clarke thus casts doubt on the uncomplicated equation Piranesi had previously tried to draw between memory and identity: "'You don't think of yourself as Matthew Rose Sorensen?' / 'No […] I haven't got his mind and I haven't got his memories'" (212).

At the end of the novel the narrator shares all of Piranesi's memories, but they are no longer one and the same. Rather than unbroken narrative continuity, what connects them, and what connected Piranesi to Sorensen, seems to be their shared habits. The most obvious, and the only one left intact among all three layers of the palimpsest (as by the end, even the love of clothes is gone) is writing: the narrator still intends to compile a book, just as Sorensen did in the beginning and Piranesi expressed interest in doing. More to the point, he is still keeping a journal: self-narration is reinstated as Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth of personal identity, seemingly a rather Lockian notion. There is, however, a subtle difference between Locke's theory of the mind and *Piranesi*'s position on writing. What allows the narrator's identities to cohere is not the *product* of writing, consciousness extending back in time; the key here is the habit to undertake the *process* of remembering through self-writing. The narrator's collection of

journals, completed after he retrieves Sorensen's twenty missing volumes at the end of the novel, is a symbol of this continuity.

> Piranesi is always with me, but of Rose Sorensen I have only hints and shadows. I piece him together out of the objects he has left behind, from what is said about him by other people and, of course, from his journals. (238)

Where the journals take on the role of what De Quincey (2019: 54) called "the organising principles" which fuse into harmony the heterogeneous fragments of the narrator's mind, the habit of remembering they entail may be read as an ongoing negotiation between the different layers of the narrator's self. Samuel Beckett offers an explanation:

> Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness [...] Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. (Beckett 1987: 19)

Clarke espouses this idea while eschewing Beckett's pessimism. The ending of *Piranesi* is bittersweet and leaves the reader uncertain of who the narrator is. Yet it is not the total negation of meaning typical of absurdism, nor does it turn its protagonist into an Asterion, so lost and lonely that he welcomes death as a form of redemption. Sorensen was clever, but prideful enough to get himself kidnapped; Piranesi was kind, but naive enough to let himself be manipulated for years. But Piranesi's kindness allows him to take care of what little is left of Sorensen without succumbing to his same violent breakdown, and the narrator is able to temper Piranesi's naivety without letting go of his good nature.

Comparison and contrast between *Piranesi* and Borges's "Asterion" have thus far helped illuminate the novel's structure and characterisation. The symbolic value of the Minotaur myth is also worth remarking upon. Borges notes in the *Book of Imaginary Beings* that "it is fitting that at the centre of a monstrous house there should live a monstrous inhabitant" (132): the Minotaur is a hybrid, paradoxical creature, juxtaposing human and beastly traits. It is both the prisoner and guardian of the labyrinth, the killer of innocent youths and the victim of Theseus. In the postmodern labyrinth of the self, the Minotaur symbolises the fragmented, unstable abyss concealed by the fragile construct of identity (Ieranò 2007: 85; Faris 1988: 135, 146), perfect to depict a time of inner crisis. Its fragmented, unstable nature makes it a good parallel for the fragmentary, intrusive nature of traumatic memory.

In *Piranesi,* the word "Minotaur" only appears in two circumstances. The first is in Sorensen's journal fragments: "minotaur", "slave", "kill him" (62). In this context, it heightens the uncanniness of traumatic memory by hinting at a monstrous presence within the labyrinth. The word is initially associated with Sorensen, thus linking the monster to the violent memories buried in the protagonist's subconscious. The other appearance of the Minotaur is in descriptions of the First Vestibule of the House, which is "dominated by eight massive Statues of Minotaurs" (78). Like a guardian, the monster watches over the hidden hallway that links the House to the primary world. Facing this Minotaur-memory does not mean braving the labyrinth in order to slay it; it means taking care of it by following the thread of self-narration, ultimately piecing together a path to the exit.

The narrator's shifting relationship to his journals over the course of the novel mirrors the history of our cultural relationship to writing as a medium of memory: from Enlightenment-era confidence in the ability of Reason to conceptualise and accurately portray reality on the page, to a postmodern loss of trust in the possibility of preserving meaning when faced with chaotic, fragmentary experience, and on to a cautiously optimistic ending that recognises the faults of self-writing while still finding an important role for it in the construction of the self. As the narrator admits at the end of the novel, "Without the journals I would be all at sea" (238).

4. The fantastic mode and the House as inner space

In *Piranesi*, the construction of the self is achieved through the relationship between the narrator and the written word. The exploration of the self is intrinsically linked with the exploration of the text in the form of reading and writing; at the same time, this exploration is externalised and situated in the fantastical space of a labyrinth, itself a representation of the world. The polyvalence of the labyrinth metaphor is due in part to its ability to draw an association between text, mind and world (Faris 1988: 121-123). Borges's "Asterion" has played an important role in turning these metaphors into "symbolic referents for subsequent postmodernist literature" (Kravchenko 2024: 68), allowing for explorations of the complex interactions between reality and the psyche.

Through the fantastic mode, Clarke is able to turn this chain of metaphors into a metonymic chain where "one object does not *stand* for another, but literally *becomes* that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in

a permanent flux and instability" (Jackson 2003: 42). When *Piranesi*'s narrator leaves the House at the end of the novel, his loved ones tell each other that his memories of entrapment are just "a description of a mental breakdown seen from the inside" (237). This is presented as a rationalisation, as the House is an actual place, with people and objects able to travel to and from it; but the remark is true insofar as the House functions as an extension of the narrator's self. Assmann writes of science fiction that "the genre takes on a special role in a world that – under the impact of trauma – has lost its realistic shape and is therefore constantly being fictionalized" (2011: 273). In departing from realism, the narrator projects his interiority onto physical space; via metonymic shift, the place comes to embody the individual who calls it home, and the individual comes to embody the culture they belong to. Ballard (2014a: 99) names this "fusion of the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche" *inner space* and discusses "its redemptive and therapeutic power".

What is the inner space of *Piranesi* like, then? Descriptions of the House bear several hypertextual echoes, resembling both *Narnia*'s Charn (Dugger 2021: 63) and Borges's House of Asterion. As previously mentioned, the title of the novel calls to mind Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings, evoking architecture vast enough to become landscape and creating "a totalising space, a universe unto itself" (Morris 2024: 121). The descriptions of staircases seemingly built for giants, ceilings high enough for clouds to form, and a lower level that contains an ocean of tides also mirror the "architectural dreams" of "vast Gothic halls" inspired by Piranesi's work in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (De Quincey 1986: 105-108). Where De Quincey's visions are filled with "friezes of never-ending stories" (De Quincey 186: 103) from history and myth, *Piranesi*'s House is populated with countless statues. De Quincey and the narrator even use similar wording to describe the sea that sweeps their respective labyrinths: "my mind tossed – and surged with the ocean" (De Quincey 1986: 108); "in my mind are all the tides, their seasons, their ebbs and flows" (*Piranesi* 243). Within this dreamlike space, *Piranesi*'s confessional self-writing deviates from the realism of the Enlightenment-era memoirs evoked by its style. Instead, it dives into less rational territory.

The House's marble halls lined with statues also echo the *loci* and *imagines* employed in classical *ars memoriae* (Assmann 2011: 210). The narrator theorises that the statues exist "because they embody the Ideas and Knowledge that flowed out of the other World into this one" (90). When trying to understand why he knows words he does not remember a referent for, he turns to the statues to

explain "how the House places new ideas gently and naturally" in his mind (121). Even after returning to the primary world, he keeps revisiting the House in his mind through a process that closely mirrors mnemotechnics:

> I close my eyes and I name a particular vestibule to myself; then I name a hall. I imagine I am walking the path from the vestibule to the hall. I note with precision the doors I must pass through, the rights and lefts I must take, the statues on the walls that I must pass. (243)

The House may thus be read as a spatialisation of memory and thought, a world of simulacra; though Piranesi does not share the common understanding of the relationship between representation and the thing represented, between word and referent, between memory and event. As Błaszkiewicz (2021: 119) and Dugger (2021: 68-79) note, the hierarchy is reversed: "I would argue that the Statue is superior to the thing itself, the Statue being perfect, eternal and not subject to decay" (222). While their perfection is questionable (at several points we see derelict halls and crumbling sculptures), the statues certainly seem to bend time. They remind Piranesi of his repressed past, like in the Faun incident, and they tell him about the future: in the passage "A conversation" (39-43), they function as units of meaning that convey a complex warning. These analexes and prolexes place the House outside of linear time, an idea supported by the narrator's abandonment of the Western calendar and by the fact that his inner sense of time periodically falls "out of sync" (68) with the primary world.

Time within the House is cyclical. Spatial repetition, a common trait to all labyrinths, corresponds here to temporal repetition. Piranesi's life is dominated by natural cycles, such as the flow of tides, as well as the cycles of habit; some tied to material needs (fishing and foraging), some to spiritual needs. Habitual journaling is crucial to his memory, and a similar importance may be attributed to his rites for the dead. Having found the remains of previous prisoners, Piranesi brings them offerings of food and flowers, pays regular visits, and tells tales of the House's wonders. He trivialises the difference between the living and the dead, repeatedly baffling other characters by including the remains whenever he counts the House's inhabitants. This form of ritual commemoration has been conceptualised by Pierre Nora as a symbolic *lieu de mémoire* where the past is re-actualised (re-membered) and crystallised in collective memory (Calzoni 2007b: 533-534).

As shown below, the House does hold significance for collective memory. For now, we note the potential of repetition for individual memory: even when

casting doubt on Piranesi's sanity, Ketterley remarks that Piranesi has total recall when it comes to the House's cycles (69). And yet, the narrator does forget: "Time. You're always losing it" (68). Just as he loses track of time, the narrator loses sight of the discrepancies in his journals until confronted with them. Like Shelby in *Memento*, he finds himself repeating the same conversations over and over. This too is presented as a cycle, "repeating roughly once every eighteen months" (68).

Myśliwiec (2024: 112) notes that the House is a character in its own right, an active force able to shape its inhabitants. The shape it imposes is circular and repetitive, and here repetition takes on a double meaning. On the one hand, the House encourages ritualistic commemoration; on the other, it bears witness to the narrator's traumatic re-enactment. In trauma theory, repetition is a symptom: the traumatised mind gets stuck on a violent interruption of narrative memory and re-experiences the traumatic event over and over again (Van der Kolk 1991: 436). Piranesi does experience post-traumatic flashbacks, but the House is never the cause of such episodes. Rather, its presence is soothing, and Piranesi attributes a protective role to the cyclical amnesia it induces: "*if the House has made you forget, then it has done so for good reason. [...] It does not matter that you do not understand the reason. You are the Beloved Child of the House. Be comforted*" (112). Unable to integrate the violence of Sorensen's entrapment into a coherent self-narrative, the narrator's mind does the only thing it can: it represses the painful memory to continue functioning, breaking the linear flow of time. The House's repetitions offer emotional anaesthesia, allowing the traumatised identity of Sorensen to fade away and the post-traumatic identity of Piranesi to be born.

> He had suffered. He had been alone with his enemy. It had been more than he could bear. [...] Matthew Rose Sorensen had torn into pieces the description of his enslavement that he had written in his Journal and he had scattered the pieces [...] Then the House in its Mercy had caused him to fall asleep – which was by far the best thing for him – and it had placed him inside me. (191)

This transition is not shown, but it has dulled the loneliness, claustrophobia, hunger and thirst that plagued Sorensen. Piranesi appreciates the company of remains and birds, the endless succession of hallways, the abundance of seaweed and rainwater: the pain has been made so alien to him that he no longer recognises it as his own. Reading a fragment written by Sorensen, Piranesi muses: "I wished that I could reach through his writing to comfort him, to show [...] how the House provides and protects its Children" (126). Sorensen's prison, to Piranesi, becomes a place of immeasurable beauty and infinite kindness.

The recontextualization of trauma as aesthetic pleasure is common to postmodern visual and literary arts, exemplified by works such as Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* 1962-63 print series (see Botescu Sireteanu 2022). The novel element in *Piranesi* is that the (an)aesthetic does not cause a loss of emotive response or "death of affect" (Ballard 2014b: 116). On the contrary, Piranesi's empathy in the face of death and trauma extends even to his kidnapper (such as in the section titled "I comfort Dr Ketterley", 216-217), as well as his own past self, whom he treats like a scared child: "*Do not be afraid. You are safe. Go back to sleep. I will take care of us both*" (191).

In fact, Piranesi is childlike on multiple levels (Myśliwiec 2024: 120-121). It is no surprise, then, that entering the House requires a return "to a child-like state of wonder, a pre-rational consciousness" (153): Piranesi's inner space is also a place of regression. Finding the House means getting in touch with the same state of the eye that according to De Quincey grants children "a power of painting […] upon the darkness all sorts of phantoms" (De Quincey 1986: 102). The House thus stands at a crossroads of several spatial metaphors: not just a mind palace, but the theatre of the mind, the *camera obscura* where the film of the subconscious is developed, the deepest layer of the palimpsest where latent memories are preserved. In Borges's "Asterion", the Minotaur's innocence is uncanny because it makes him unable to recognise the monstrosity of his own actions: of his sacrificial victims, he says "I run joyously to find them […] One after another, they fall, without my ever having to bloody my hands" (Borges 1999: 221). Likewise, Piranesi's regression makes him unable to recognise his own imprisonment. It is also a temporary condition. As the statues themselves prophesy, the cycle will break: "*A message from afar. Obscure Writing. Innocence eroded*" (43). The "Obscure Writing" in question may be read as Sorensen's traumatic memories in the shape of torn journal pages. Traumatic memory is impressed upon the subconscious but remains unavailable; the House preserves the scraps, but in the unserviceable form of bird-nest fodder. Piranesi eventually retrieves them, the first element in his piecing-together of identity, but making sense of them is a painful process. The House can provide comfort, but not growth and healing, just as anaesthesia can prepare the body for surgery, but a doctor still needs to do the stitching.

This is where the "message from afar" comes in. What allows the narrator to heal is the intrusion of Sarah Raphael, whose identity as a police officer is doubly significant. She heralds *Piranesi*'s connection to detective fiction, as shown above, but her role as a detective is itself therapeutic: just as a physician works backwards from the symptoms to reach a diagnosis and cure a disease, a detective works

backwards from the evidence to reconstruct the particulars of a crime and stop the perpetrator (Hoffman 1973: 74-77). In Raphael's case, the more appropriate comparison is with psychotherapy. To investigate Sorensen's disappearance she delves into his inner space and reaches out to Piranesi, leaving written messages and persisting when he initially rejects them; she offers Sorensen comfort and room to cry; and, most importantly, she engages the narrator in thoughtful conversation that, however painful, helps him work through his trauma. Being one of the inciting incidents of the narration, Raphael's intervention interrupts the cycle of re-enactment and regression, and her presence is what allows Piranesi to avoid losing himself like Sorensen did: the journal entry immediately following his re-traumatising breakdown is titled "It is 16 [Raphael] that is my friend and not the Other" (190). A colleague tells of a previous encounter between Raphael and another "troubled person […] She sat down with [him] and she got him to stop throwing flaming newspaper everywhere and she got him to come down" (236). Likewise, instead of coercing Piranesi into leaving the House, she allows him to come to the decision on his own terms. Her perspective helps, but the piecing-together of identity is an active choice on the part of the narrator. The process is bittersweet, and coincides with the prophesied erosion of innocence: "perhaps even people you like and admire immensely can make you see the World in ways you would rather not" (228).

The relationship between inner space and those who explore it is as complicated as the relationship between the subject and the remote depths of the self. To traumatised minds like Piranesi and James Ritter (a previous prisoner), the House is a place of comfort, to the point that Ritter cries "not of fear, but for happiness" when brought back for a visit (239). To Raphael, who is described as "not the easiest person in the world to work with" (235) and seems to stand apart from her colleagues, the quiet and solitary halls are dangerously alluring: "in them she hopes to find what she needs" (242). To poets like Sylvia D'Agostino, who "lived very much inside her head" (178), it is a source of inspiration. To Arne-Sayles and Ketterley, who have used it to imprison and abuse others, it is a labyrinth inducing "amnesia, total mental collapse, etcetera, etcetera" (91).

Though reflective of individual psyches, the House also takes on a collective significance. Arne-Sayles comes to theorise its existence while looking for the lost knowledge of Ancient Man and Ketterley, lacking the imagination required to enter a state of childlike innocence, reaches it by chanting Brittonic rituals as a sort of intellectual regression. The two conceptualise the House as a world created by the transition from antiquity to modernity:

[…] I pictured [the wisdom of the ancients] as a sort of energy flowing out of the world, and I thought that this energy must be going somewhere. […] This is what I call a Distributary World – it was created by the ideas flowing out of another world. (89)

The House is a paradoxical place of forgetting and remembrance: the world "into which everything forgotten flows" (153), only to be preserved forever. It functions much like a Foucaultian heterotopia (Myśliwiec 2024: 123-124), the archetypal museum "in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit" (Foucault 1986: 26). Arne-Sayles even theorises that "in some remote area of the labyrinth, statues of obsolete computers are coming into being as we speak" (90), reflecting the dynamic that turns living memory into cultural memory: when a recollection of the past is no longer relevant, "it becomes objectified, exteriorized and stored away in symbolic forms" (Assmann 2010: 110). In *Piranesi*, rushing tides of ideas carve the recollections into otherworldly statues. Identity is a plastic force, shaping memory just as memory shapes it. If so, whose cultural identity shapes the House?

Architectural descriptions of the House "do not vary much at all in terms of a consistently applied classical grammar" (Morris 2024: 121). Ketterley summarises it as "an infinite series of classical buildings knitted together" (179). Many statues depict creatures from Greek myth: Minotaurs, fauns (15), satyrs (37), centaurs (38). On the other hand, Arne-Sayles and Ketterley connect to the House through the specific cultural past of Britain, by performing rituals on bog bodies (149) and evoking the Romano-British king Addedomarus (150). Roman, Greek, Celtic: the past flowing into the House meshes the various heritages modern British society has laid claim to. Even the statues of elephants and gorillas refer to the colonial past of the British Empire, as imagery made popular by the Orientalist craze of the Nineteenth century. The House represents what modernity has left behind, a counter-narrative to the view of history as linear progress. It holds the cultural memory of a mythicised past where "the world was constantly speaking to Ancient Man" (148). Rather than a foreign country, the past of *Piranesi* is an uncanny land: the ideas that shape the House are still recognisable as products of Western culture, modes of thought that have been cast aside as latent memory, "still present but rarely seen" (Assmann 2011: 150).

Again, the reaction of different characters to this uncanny place is indicative of their relationship to the past. Ketterley explores the House in a bid for power, never seeking to understand it on its terms: "he cannot imagine why anything should exist if he cannot make use of it" (90). When the House does not provide what he

wants, he dismisses it: "There isn't even anything alive. Just endless dreary rooms all the same, full of decaying figures covered with bird shit" (47). This dismissal does not diminish his fear of the House, and he is constantly anxious about being swept away or spending too long inside, lest the labyrinth drive him mad. His perspective on memory reflects colonialist views of the past as an instrument of control, or else a dangerous presence that must be avoided entirely.

Arne-Sayles fetishises the past as a rejection of modern rationality. Taking pride in the label of "transgressive thinker" and gathering followers from the Sixties' New Age movement, the self-proclaimed Prophet treats the discovery of the House as proof of his genius while still failing to see it as valuable on its own. He compares the place to a cave system left behind by draining water, a leftover no longer holding anything valuable after the ideas that shaped it have "seeped away" (90). Remarkably, in insisting that there is nothing left of the tides of ideas, Arne-Sayles fails to acknowledge the literal sea that is still actively shaping the halls. He is more enamoured with the abstract idea of a pre-rational world than with the shift in perspective that truly confronting it would entail.

Both Arne-Sayles and Ketterley refuse to linger in the House, fearing it as "a source of madness and forgetfulness" (112). Instead, they enslave others to explore it for them. The narrator is one such instrument in their "colonisation of the past". While he may be read as a dismantling of the Noble Savage stereotype (Myśliwiec 2024: 120), in his relationship to Ketterley he is more akin to a colonial agent going native. Ketterley's manipulation is what leads him to adopt the positivist view of the world as "a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted" (60), but his experience of the House periodically leads him to a different conclusion: "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). Though Ketterley attempts to keep Piranesi compliant by making him doubt his sanity, he develops an animistic reverence for the House (Myśliwiec 2024: 119) that allows him to understand it in ways impossible to Arne-Sayles and Ketterley: he is the first to make the connection between the statues and the ideas they represent, and the only one to recognise that "the World still speaks to me every day" (154).

This is where Piranesi's relationship to the "essentially imperialist" (Mendlesohn 2010: 9) genre of portal-quest fantasy comes into play. The secondary world normally represents an unchanging past, easily circumscribed and narrated from an outside perspective. But while the House resembles both ruin and museum, the memory of the past held within it is far from crystallised. As noted by Błaszkiewicz (2021: 120-122), the narrator surrenders to the plastic force of his secondary

world: instead of learning to appropriate and master it, the narrator breaks the "iron hand of modern rationality" (152) and lets the secondary world appropriate him. By giving up control over his memory (individual, with Sorensen's amnesia, and cultural, with Piranesi's epiphany on the nature of the House), the narrator of *Piranesi* accepts memory as living *vis*, "a driving force that follows its own rules" (Assmann 2011: 20). This acceptance of memory as a process allows him to re-construct his psychological continuity, and consequently to re-connect with the world around him. The memory of a pre-rational perspective has worth, not because it hides a supposed secret, but because it still belongs to humanity, and embracing it may illuminate sides of the world that modernity has lost sight of. As Sanders (2024: 301) states, Clarke reconciles positivist faith in Reason with Romantic sensibilities, exploring cultural anxieties about a lost connection to the world.

5. Conclusion

It is not in spite of, but precisely thanks to its fantastic setting, that *Piranesi* manages to deal with both individual and cultural trauma.

On the individual level, Clarke explores the trauma of a life violently interrupted, and the necessary adjustments required to still make sense of the post-traumatic world; meaningless repetition can feel like the madness of traumatic re-enactment, but the habits formed by it can preserve sanity and take on a meaning of their own through active ritualisation. Although the novel was written before the Covid-19 pandemic, it is no coincidence that Piranesi received critical acclaim and resonated with so many readers during the 2020 quarantines.

On the cultural level, the novel deals with anxieties due not to a single triggering event but to the cumulative effects of a radical change in mode of thought: the positivistic, progressive narrative born with the Enlightenment clashes against the feeling that something has been lost along the way, that there is a deeper connection to the world to be retrieved, a sense of loss made literal in *Piranesi* through what Arne-Sayles, echoing Max Weber, calls the "disenchantment" (148) of the world. Clarke's debut novel *Jonathan Strange and Mister Norrell* (2004) deals with a similar theme, exploring the reaction of Nineteenth-century British society to the sudden return of magic. In *Piranesi*, the reflection is carried forth into the Twenty-First century to grapple with the postmodern cultural crisis. The House thus comes to embody not just a single protagonist's inner space, but the

collective archive where Western modernity has stored away its repressed beliefs and superstitions.

The abundance of hypertextual connections in *Piranesi* turns the novel into a palimpsest, connecting the narrator's struggles to the rich symbolical repertoire of the labyrinth myth, as well as to centuries of explorations on the theme of memory. In this sense, fantastic literature "operates as a mnemonic device" (Lachmann 2010: 306): by drawing upon traditions excluded by mainstream scientific discourse, it preserves them in cultural memory. As a literary mode, in its departure from realism and its use of metonymy, it opens the way for a lively dialogue on memory, capable of connecting the individual and cultural dimensions of memory studies. Further research of the specific manifestations of memory within fantastic literature is warranted to illuminate this connection.

References

Primary

Ballard, J.G.

  2014a *A User's Guide to the Millennium,* London: Harper Collins.

  2014b *The Atrocity Exhibition.* London, Fourth Estate.

Beckett, S.

  1960 *Krapp's Last Tape & Other Dramatic Pieces*, New York: Grove Press Inc.

  1987 *Proust. Three dialogues*, London : J. Calder.

Borges, J.L.

  1999 *Collected Fictions.* Translated by A. Hurley, London: Penguin Books.

  2005 *The Book of Imaginary Beings.* Translated by A. Hurley, London: Penguin Books.

Clarke, S.

  2004 *Jonathan Strange and Mister Norrell,* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

  2020 *Piranesi*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

  2024 *The Wood at Midwinter,* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Danielewski, M.Z.

  2000 *House of Leaves. The Remastered Full-color Edition,* New York: Pantheon Books.

De Quincey, T.

  1986 *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater,* London: Penguin Books.

  2019 "The Palimpsest". In *Suspiria de Profundis*, Mineola: Dover Publications.

Secondary

Aarseth, Espen J.

  1997 *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Anderson Imbert, E.

    1960 "Un cuento de Borges: 'La Casa de Asterión'", *Revista Iberoamericana* 25 (49), 33-43.

Assmann, A.

    2011 *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Arts of Memory,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Assmann, J.

    2010 "Communicative and Cultural Memory", in: A. Erll et al. (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook,* Berlin, New York: De Gruyter.

Bain, P.C.

    2021 "Book review. *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke", *The Indexer* 39 (1), 113-117.

Błaszkiewicz, B.

    2021 "On the Idea of the Secondary World in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*", *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies* 30 (1), 111-132.

Botescu Sireteanu, I.

    2022 "Death as Disaster: Andy Warhol's Aesthetics of Catastrophe", *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* XII, 93-103.

Boulter, J.

    2009 "Borges and the Trauma of Posthuman History", in S. Herbrechter et al. (eds.), *Cy-Borges. Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges*, Cranbury: Associated University Presses.

Calzoni, R.

    2007a "Fotografia e memoria", in E. Agazzi et al. (eds.), *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi interdisciplinari,* Rome: Meltemi Editore.

    2007b "Luoghi della memoria", in E. Agazzi et al. (eds.), *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi interdisciplinari,* Rome: Meltemi Editore.

Cuddon, J.A. et al.

    2013 *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Dillon, S.

    2007 *The Palimpsest. Literature, Criticism, Theory,* London: Continuum.

Dugger, J.M.

    2021 "Lewis and Clarke in the Caves: Art and Platonic Worlds in *Piranesi*", *Mythlore* 40 (1), 63-83.

Eco, U.

    2004 *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Milan: Bompiani.

Faris, W.B.

    1988 *Labyrinths of language. Symbolic landscape and narrative design in modern fiction,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Foucault, M.
　　1986 "Of Other Spaces". Translated by J. Miskoviec. In *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22-27.
Genette, G.
　　1997 *Palimpsest. Literature in the Second Degree.* Translated by C. Newman and C. Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Hayles, N.K.
　　2002 *"*Saving the Subject. Remediation in *House of Leaves*", *American Literature* 74 (4), 779-806.
Hoffman, N.Y.
　　1973 *"*The Doctor and the Detective Story". *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 224 (1), 74-77.
Ieranò, G.
　　2007 *Il mito di Arianna. Da Omero a Borges,* Rome: Carocci.
Iwata, M.
　　2008 "Records and Recollections in Krapp's Last Tape". *Journal of Irish Studies* 23, 34-43.
Kohlke, M. and Gutleben, C.
　　2015 "Troping the Neo-Victorian City". *Neo-Victorian Cities. Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics* 4, 1-40.
Kravchenko, N. and Markova, Y.
　　2024 "Symbolic metametaphors in Borges' 'The house of Asterion'", *Lege artis. Language yesterday, today, tomorrow*, 9 (1), 67-83.
Lachmann, R.
　　2010 "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature", in Errl, Astrid and Ansgar Nünning (eds.). *A companion to cultural memory studies,* Berlin: De Gruyter.
Morris, M.
　　2024 "*Piranesi*: An Unsettling World of Architecture". *Architectural Design* 94, 118-125.
Mendlesohn, F.
　　2008 *Rhetorics of Fantasy,* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
Myśliwiec, K.
　　2024 "Animism as a Key to Remodelling Modern Environmental Ethics: An Ecocritical Reading of *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke". *InScriptum* 5, 107-127.
Pakman, M.
　　2007 "Soggettività, etica ed estetica della memoria", in E. Agazzi et al. (eds.), *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi interdisciplinari,* Rome: Meltemi Editore.
Rimmon-Kenan, S.
　　1980 "Doubles and Counterparts. Patterns of Interchangeability in Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths'", *Critical Inquiry* 6 (4), 639-647.
Sanders, B.
　　2024 "Clarke's Piranesi as the Wordsworthian Scientist", *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle. Journal of Creative Writing* 99, 297-302.

Shiloh, I.
    2011 *The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room,* New York: Peter Lang Verlag.
Van der Kolk, B. et al.
    1991 "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma".
        American Imago 48 (4), 425-454.
Yaffe, G.
    2007 *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"*,
        Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CHIARA LOCATELLI

Università degli Studi di Bergamo
chiara.locatelli@unibg.it
ORCID code: 0009-0005-4077-2878

BOOK
REVIEWS

Michael Kidd, *Black Protagonists of Early Modern Spain:*
Three Key Plays in Translation. **Indianapolis: Hackett, 2023, xiv + 337 pp.**
(Reviewed by Jasen Rodríguez, Texas State University)

Michael Kidd's most recent publication, *Black Protagonists of Early Modern Spain: Three Key Plays in Translation* (2023) is an indispensable resource for Golden Age drama scholarship and performance, guiding the reader through the structure, ideology, and language of the Spanish secular *Comedia*, where the imagination of three early modern playwrights meets the representational conventions of the historically marginalized Black Spaniard. The wide scope of the 103-page introduction, coherently divided into 4 main sections (Historical and Literary Contexts, Biographical Sketches [of the authors of the triad of plays], Literary Analysis, and a Translator's Note) lends itself for use in the literature classroom without losing its readability for an audience more focused on making scripts come to life on the stage. It is a careful analysis of sources both contemporary and posterior to the principal works studied with illuminating quotes from figures as well known as Cervantes to more obscure names (for the non-specialist), all woven together as the essential foreground for the drama emerging from the perception of blackness during early modernity.

In the first major section of the introduction, Kidd tracks how Black characters in Spanish golden age drama enter more prevalently onto the stage as a secondary consequence of the growing trade of enslaved persons (18). This context, of course, entails the one-dimensional, stereotypical representations unfortunately determined by a centuries-long tradition of ridiculing marginalized groups. Black characters, in a way similar to the pimp, the Basque, and the clown, have occupied a cultural space characterized by caricature and social exclusion (29). A most noteworthy precursor of the type of representations found in the Triad author's plays is explored (namely, the analysis of 3 plays attributed to Lope de Vega from pages 32-42), though the focus is certainly on the inversion of the limited depth of Black characters so natural to early modern Spanish drama demonstrated in the works Gil Vicente and Lope de Rueda (32).

Kidd's elaboration of the role of the *bozal* dialect at several points of the introduction (but first discussed at length in this section) bestows the reader, whether scholar or performer, with a knowledge that appreciates the evolution of Black characters from being represented on stage in a mere comedic light (usually for the sake of a play's extension) to the forgoing of the almost always comically unintelligible broken speech for "an elegant classical Spanish indistinguishable from that of their noble white counterparts" (33).

In the second major section of the introduction, common historical threads and trends between the Triad authors are explored in order to lay bare some interpretative possibilities the plays may afford the critic and student alike.

The historical attention to detail in the scarce plays of Diego Jimenez de Enciso, for example, is juxtaposed with the minimal information known about the author of *Juan Latino* (suggested by Kidd, according to his research, to have been a descendant of Jewish converts). Special focus, however, is paid to the involvement of DJE in slave-trafficking ventures not at all uncommon to a man of his time and of a politically favorable status such as his (43-44). An important connection between the Triad authors comes to light in the biographical research done on Andrés de Claramonte y Carroy: the appearance of praise given to the other two in a book authored by ACC. (48). Kidd further binds the authors to a kind of aesthetic consensus through his discovery that all three of the Triad authors attended the Count of Saldaña's literary academy (51).

The reconciliation of each of these plays featuring Black protagonists is established by shedding light on biographical coincidences between the three, namely that the Triad authors all spawn from "non-noble or questionable back-grounds" (53), suggesting a tie between their experienced social stigma with that of their Black protagonists and, moreover, their literary and staged representations to be considered as evidence of an internal struggle made manifest. Their shared business in Sevilla makes for an undeniable influence of the city's enormous reliance on slavery, compared with a seemingly unremarkable presence in the interior and a totally negligible population, if any, in the north (53), inevitably inspiring greater representation of Black people on stage and, in part due to this increased visibility, motivating the authors to provide these characters with great psychological depth. To conclude this section, Kidd, returning to the question of the chronology, insists that it is less important than the consideration of the short window of time (1623-1624) in which these works could have been written, pointing to its significance as a sound interpretation of the possibility of collaboration, in some way, between these authors towards a common goal of their works.

In the third and longest major section of the introduction, several established themes and tropes associated with the representation of Black characters at the time are investigated in order to, once more, bring together all three plays under a critical banner, though, as Kidd argues, such an endeavour isn't to suggest that these plays are merely of interest because of what their protagonists may signify on a racial studies axis (56). Regarding *Juan Latino*, he remarks at length about the merits of the learned enslaved person as adhering, to a great extent, to the biographical information known of the real-life Juan Latino (61). On the other hand, he notes how, disappointingly, despite an outstanding knowledge of Latin, Juan Latino's utility to the king is valued more than the possibility of him being humanely liberated as a material demonstration of the supposed appreciation of the titular character's scholastic talents (64).

The mistreatment of Black people in *The Brave Black Soldier*, however, has nothing to do with debates regarding the ethics of slavery, caught up, perhaps, in Juan de Encino's work as a necessary reflection of his personal involvement in the trafficking and ownership of enslaved persons. In Claramonte's play, Kidd argues, the protagonist has demonstrable proof (however inaccurate given the historical data regarding the inheritance of status as an enslaved person) that he was never enslaved, and thus the action, and specifically his character's treatment by his white compatriots, is to be understood as discriminatory only along the basis of color (71), paving the way also for his full embrace of a daring nature that is to justify him as a worthy contributor to the mission of the crown (72). The novelty of such a view was, as Kidd points out, to cause such a scandal as to prompt the censoring of the most outstanding achievements of Juan Mérida: that of marrying his former owner, a white noble, and his induction into the Order of Santiago (74).

The complex space of the Black protagonist's exploits is further nuanced by Kidd's analysis of various distasteful comments made by Juan Mérida, ranging from antisemitic to homophobic in nature, a conscious move by the playwright aiming to make the titular character more appealing to a white European audience that would read his treatment of these other marginal figures as a signaling of an adequate participation/membership of the dominant social group, described in general by Kidd as "reactionary", complicating previously established color-coded language tropes by associating his blackness with the righteous efforts of Catholics to counteract the bleak whiteness of Protestant rebellion. (75-76).

A contrast is made between the worlds of *Juan Latino*, *The Brave Black Soldier* and *Virtues Overcome Appearances* in the analysis of the latter. The reader is made aware earlier in the introduction that Vélez de Guevara's play's importance

is such that it undoubtedly was used by Calderón de la Barca for the redaction of *La vida es sueño*. However, its merits are perhaps even more deserving of critical attention thanks to Kidd's framing of *Virtues Overcome Appearance*'s shocking thought experiment of a world without even the most minor of Black characters being disrupted by the birth of a Black prince (81). Describing Filipo's discovery of his blackness as an "anti-Narcissus moment" and alluding to Lacanian psychoanalysis to corroborate its profound effect on him, a suggestion is made more than once that this scene in particular might reflect a deep truth about the playwright's self-hatred as a Jew (86). The strength of the play's resolution (an interracial marriage between a Black man and noble white woman, common amongst the three plays) is measured by Kidd against the perplexing oppositions it suggests at once (91), which, much like questions relevant to our times, as he will come to suggest in the concluding remarks of this section, will continue to produce the conflict necessary for creation in the performing arts.

A well-written synthesis of the ideas presented not only in this particular section, but as a summation of all of Kidd's commentary throughout the introduction up to this point, the conclusion brings the literary analysis section to a close, not without leaving some questions for the reader to ponder as he eventually reaches the translated plays. Ultimately, determining a final interpretation of the Triad author's writing of Black protagonists and their contexts, given the ambiguous response of critical literature, as Kidd suggests, doesn't seem fruitful (97). Instead, the work of the reader is meant to resolve this critical ambiguity by way of speaking the tension filled lines which initially "captivated and unsettled" early modern audiences (98), in the hopes of continuing a dialogue initiated by the Triad authors.

The fourth and final section of the introduction, the translator's notes, is decidedly brief. As Kidd points out, a great deal of his translating philosophy has been spelled out in other works of his, not to mention at many other points in the introduction itself (99). Among the most important issues addressed are the following: the prose rendering of the majority of the *comedias*' Spanish verses, doubling both as a practical solution to some irreconcilable issues of translation between the languages in verse and a modest perspective of his work as a translator; documenting the textual transmission of each of the three works, work that was notably more difficult in the case of *The Brave Black Soldier* (100); the demarcation of scenes according to opposing European and Anglo-American theatre traditions; important racial terms and the *bozal* dialect (discussed at an earlier point of this review); and finally, the translation of the wordplay and various puns in the manuscripts consulted for this work.

Michael Kidd has opened the door with *Black Protagonists of Early Modern Spain* not only for further critical discussion on Black representation in the early modern period but to performances that will be able to apply the great historical research and analytical insight he has provided in the introduction. It is truly exciting to imagine how much interdisciplinary work he has facilitated thanks to his fabulous translations and commentary. The work is a must have not only in any Golden Age Theatre course, but in courses which survey Spanish literature at large, surveys of World or European literature, Modern literature courses, and, surely, any literature course that is designed to discuss works where Black characters are the focal point of a larger societal drama.

JASEN RODRÍGUEZ

Texas State University
jdr271@txstate.edu
ORCID code: 0009-0006-1484-0467

Carolina Alzate, *Un cuento que no se acaba. Agripina Samper de Ancínar e Inés Ancínar Samper (1848-1892).* **Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2024, 435 pp.**
(Reseñado por Ana I. Simón Alegre, Adelphi University, New York)

A primera vista, de este libro *Un cuento que no se acaba* – cuidadosamente editado por la profesora Carolina Alzate – sobresale la genealogía de la creación femenina que presenta, gestada por una madre intelectual y escritora, la colombiana Agripina Samper Agudelo de Ancínar (1831-1892), y continuada por su orgullosa hija, amante de la escritura de diarios personales, Inés Ancínar Samper (1860-1897). *Un cuento que no se acaba* constituye un caso excepcional entre las mujeres dedicadas a las letras: para escribir sobre Agripina Samper de Ancínar e Inés Ancínar Samper, la profesora Alzate ha contado con un archivo familiar generado, conservado (como en el Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia) y transmitido por mujeres y para las mujeres, siempre respetado por la familia. Subrayo este punto porque una de las principales dificultades a las que nos enfrentamos quienes investigamos sobre mujeres es que, debido a su fragmentación, muchos de sus archivos son difíciles de localizar o incluso por diferentes avatares se han perdido. El caso de las mujeres de la familia Ancínar-Samper, sin embargo, es distinto: constituye un ejemplo de cómo madres e hijas han colaborado en la construcción y preservación de sus genealogías familiares. La hija, Inés, cuidó el álbum de poesías, firmas y otras obras literarias de su madre, Agripina. Aunque, como Alzate comenta del diario de Inés en algún momento se arrancaron algunas páginas. Entre los materiales que conserva este archivo y que están recogidos en este trabajo, se han preservado poemas que, en algunos casos, Agripina nunca llegó a publicar y, en otros, gracias a este álbum, Alzate ha podido localizar versiones previas a las definitivas. Estos textos han permitido descifrar cómo José María Samper Agudelo, hermano de Agripina, modificó posteriormente algunos de los versos originales. En algunas ocasiones, Agripina firmó usando el seudónimo de Pía Rigán y destacan de sus escritos especialmente los poéticos, donde se aprecia la musicalidad de sus versos

y la enfatización de un yo deseante. Agripina Samper participó en la "Hermandad Lírica" de poesía, representando un modelo particular de relacionarse, escribir y producir literatura.

Es importante destacar que madre e hija, Agripina e Inés, pertenecieron a la élite bogotana, privilegio que facilitó este cuidado familiar femenino por preservar la memoria de quienes las precedieron. Ambas mujeres pusieron parte de este privilegio al servicio de mantener intacta su genealogía, un acto que a priori puede parecer aislado y limitado a una familia concreta, pero que, gracias a la introducción de Alzate, subraya la importancia de conservar el archivo en su conjunto. No solo esto, sino que también Alzate reflexiona de la importancia que tiene tomar conciencia de cómo hacer públicos documentos que han pertenecido al ámbito de la vida privada de mujeres: "Este deseo de su heredera se vincula con el de las herederas simbólicas, entre las cuales me encuentro, que quieren hacer visible la tradición de la escritura femenina que fue encerrada tanto tiempo y en épocas tan cruciales" (22). En definitiva, gracias a esta obra accedemos a un conjunto archivístico de ensueño para un trabajo de investigación sobre genealogía de mujeres-escritoras.

Un cuento que no se acaba está dividido en dos partes: una introducción (13-26) y las obras de Agripina Samper, que está compuesta de sus poesías (33-174), artículos que publicó en el periódico *El Debate* (175-198), reseñas y otros textos (199-228), una selección de su correspondencia (229-254), la edición facsímil de su álbum autógrafo (255-298), y la de Inés Ancízar Samper, que se compone únicamente de su diario íntimo (299-422). Además, la profesora Alzate incluye una bibliografía detallada de la obra en prosa y poesía de Agripina (423-428) y todo el libro está acompañado de una cuidada selección de fotografías familiares y de otras imágenes vinculadas con la producción literaria de Samper-Ancízar. Entre los temas que la profesora Alzate destaca hay dos que quiero subrayar. El primero es el de la cuestión de la ortografía americana, opción que Agripina adoptó para escribir sus trabajos. Alzate destaca este rasgo tanto para justificar el planteamiento de su edición crítica como para subrayar el compromiso político de Agripina, quien con su escritura buscaba distanciarse de la Real Academia Española y promover una identidad lingüística americana (27). El segundo tema es la relación con su cuñada, la también escritora Soledad Acosta de Samper, queda evidenciada en los dibujos que esta realizó en el álbum de Agripina (275). Sin embargo, ambas familias terminaron distanciándose por diferencias político-religiosas, especialmente tras la muerte de Manuel Ancízar, marido de Agripina, que dejó a la familia en una situación económica y social precaria. Gracias a la

reunión de estos textos en *Un cuento que no acaba*, se evidencia cómo Agripina Samper de Ancízar mantuvo debates intelectuales con escritores de la talla de José María Vergara y Vergara, y estableció diálogos con autoras como Fernán Caballero y George Sand. Resulta particularmente significativa su labor como reseñista del trabajo de otras mujeres escritoras, como hizo con el libro de Evanjelista Correa del Rincón Soler, *Los emigrados* (201-203). Respecto al diario de Inés, además de destacar que fue escrito durante un breve período (1883-1885) entre Bogotá y París, hay que subrayar el uso de una escritura encriptada para ciertos pasajes. Inés, consciente de que su diario sería leído, intentó mantener privadas algunas partes, aunque dejó la posibilidad de que fueran descifradas, tarea que la profesora Alzate ha logrado realizar con gran maestría.

Para concluir esta reseña quiero destacar que el título de este libro, *Un cuento que no acaba*, lo ha tomado Alzate de una de las poesías de Agripina – incluida en este volumen (92-96) – dedicada a su hija Inés y titulada de igual manera. El poema "Un cuento que no acaba" recrea un diálogo cotidiano entre madre e hija que revela la relación especial que ambas compartieron: el respeto de Agripina por el despertar intelectual y emocional de Inés, el espacio que le dio para afirmar su singularidad y la protección que la hija sintió siempre de su madre. De ahí su título: que el cuento, su historia, su genealogía, no termine, como ha sabido también la profesora Alzate llevar a cabo, experta en esta autora, como demostró en su anterior libro, *Pía Rigán. Cartas de Agripina Samper Agudelo a Manuel Ancízar (1857-1871)* editado por Samota libros (Bogotá) en el año 2023, y con esta nueva investigación remarca aún más. El trabajo presente – como los anteriores de Carolina Alzate – son imprescindibles tanto para las personas del mundo académico dedicadas al siglo XIX, como para aquellas que estén hambrientas de curiosidad por conocer e indagar en otra autora imprescindible para la historia de la literatura.

ANA I. SIMÓN ALEGRE

Adelphi University, New York
aisimon@adelphi.edu
ORCID code: 0000-0002-2027-1559

Juan Gabriel Vásquez, *Los nombres de Feliza.* **Madrid: Alfaguara, 2025, 288 pp.**
(Reseñado por José de María Romero Barea, I.E.S. Azahar, Sevilla)

La narración sustenta las cuestiones personales que aborda, ya sean la propia escritura o los comentarios sobre asuntos más amplios. En esta nueva iteración de su yo como escritor, Juan Gabriel Vásquez (Bogotá, 1973) comparte, con autocrítico afán, el tortuoso proceso de la lucha por recrear la existencia de una artista cuya materia prima eran la chatarra de hierro y los desperdicios de acero inoxidable.

Se combina la fe en el valor de la experiencia subjetiva con un intelecto fieramente interrogativo: "No era sencillo ni siquiera su nombre, que les enredaba la lengua a todos los que la conocieron y la obligó a pasarse la vida haciendo aclaraciones, corrigiendo ortografías" (p. 21). Así se abre paso una panorámica no solo de la evolución de un personaje, sino de los cambios en nuestra comprensión de la literatura como un ente colectivo.

Además del relato de una creadora en plenas facultades, la escultora colombiana, de ascendencia judeo-polaca Feliza Bursztyn (Bogotá, 1933 – París, 1982), se nos ofrece el conmovedor recuento de una creatividad frustrada: "Se murió de tristeza", escribía García Márquez, "y fue entonces cuando me pregunté por primera vez por qué estaba triste Feliza, y fue entonces cuando me respondí que nunca lo sabría" (p. 36).

Esa es la naturaleza del placer de leer la biografía novelada *Los nombres de Feliza*: ser una fuente narrativa inagotable que sobrepasa con creces las ilimitadas expectativas de la autoficción. Cuestiona el escritor Premio Alfaguara de Novela 2011 por *El ruido de las cosas al caer* la necesidad de escribir frente a las exigencias de no hacerlo.

El escritor latinoamericano se resiste a la presión externa que ejerce el mutismo para que confine las múltiples voces internas de Bursztyn, Premio de Escultura en el XVII Salón Nacional 1965, a una sola voz, "repetida en pedazos rotos de vasijas

griegas, miles de veces, escrita por miles de manos distintas, bien o mal, miles de personas escribiendo al mismo tiempo los nombres de Feliza" (p. 55).

Se interesa Vásquez por el exilio de la escultora en México, en casa de Gabriel García Márquez, hasta ser becada por el Ministerio de Cultura francés, así como por el papel de su peripecia en la configuración del paisaje político y cultural de toda una generación de artistas colombianos, como Jorge Gaitán Durán o Marta Traba, entre otros).

Maneja, para ello, las corrientes emocionales subyacentes a las estadísticas, los ritmos de trance de la rutina y los entumecimientos cauterizados del trauma subsiguiente: "¿Era yo un intruso, un impertinente, por querer saber de Feliza Bursztyn, por querer incluso conocerla hasta donde fuera posible, o conocerla tan bien como para contar el mundo desde sus ojos?" (p. 87).

Se adoptan todos los tropos del género, de la intimidad familiar a las sorprendentes colisiones culturales inherentes a la identidad. Emergen las estructuras tectónicas subyacentes para evocar la situación del orden público en la Colombia de principios de los años 1980, marcada por la Doctrina de la Seguridad Nacional, según la cual las Fuerzas Armadas debían combatir al enemigo interno.

Destaca el resultado por su capacidad de mezclar mito y mundanidad, resiliencia y fragilidad, así como por lo consciente que es de las exigencias y desconciertos que conllevan sobrevivir cuestionando los intereses nacionales como un individuo dentro de un grupo sometido a las presiones de la posteridad: "La vida de Feliza tuvo mucho de leyenda, pero fue ella misma quien se encargó de construirla: con su libertad ostentosa, que a los ojos de tantos era un insulto" (p. 92).

Se subrayan, implícitamente, lo excepcionales que son esas mujeres que han logrado encontrar y defender un sitio para ser ellas mismas: "Feliza llegó a la conclusión, sin saber muy bien cómo explicarlo, de que la única manera de llevar su vida era llevarla sin ataduras – ni de la familia, ni de los hombres, ni de la mirada de la gente –, y que tener un lugar en el mundo, en cambio, era la única certeza necesaria" (p. 127).

Con melancólico afán, esta novela biográfica evoca todas esas novelas que no han sido escritas, todas esas vidas que no han sido registradas: "Aquí estaba yo, cuarenta y un años y ocho meses después de la muerte de Feliza, dedicando mi vida a la suya (…) mirándola con atención o mirando su fantasma: imaginándola, en resumen, como si tuviera que esculpirla en barro" (p. 263).

Lo que nos ofrece Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Premio de la Real Academia Española 2014, a cambio de dedicarle nuestro tiempo lector, es la conjunción más lúcida

y precisa entre periodismo y ficción. No en vano, en *Los nombres de Feliza*, de manera tan directa como conspicua, la presencia autoral desaparece para concluir que tal vez solo ficción y periodismo pueden y deben coexistir como formas de registrar la realidad.

JOSÉ DE MARÍA ROMERO BAREA

I.E.S. Azahar, Sevilla
josedemariaromerobarea@gmail.com
ORCID code: 0009-0002-6511-0895

Daniel Scott Snelson, *The Little Database – A Poetics of Media Formats*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2025, 224 pp.
(Reviewed by Camilla Holm Soelseth, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University)

The Little Database – A Poetics of Media Formats is a new addition to the established series *Electronic Mediations*, which over the years has produced many noteworthy and well-cited contributions to the often now overlapping fields of the (critical) digital humanities, media-influenced literary and cultural studies, archival studies, and library and information science. *The Little Database* is thus in the company of great works like *What is Information?* (Janich 2018), *How to Talk About Video Games* (Bogost 2015), *A Geology of Media* (Parikka 2015), *Reading Writing Interfaces* (Emerson 2014), *Comparative Textual Media* (Hayles – Pressman 2013), *Digital Memory and the Archives* (Ernst 2012), and *Bodies in Technology* (Ihde 2001).

This book is another important work in this series, an interrogation into a critical aspect of our contemporary datafied society (Schäfer – van Es 2017): the little database. The work succeeds in providing an entry point into the sociopoetics of online archives and collections, which is also transferable to the investigation of larger database conglomerates in the form of platforms today. It is also a strongly humanistic endeavour in its multiscalar methodological way of approaching databases, close reading at different scales. With this, an important contribution Snelson makes to the study of digital culture and datafied society today is through the book's successful demonstration of how central the humanities have become to understanding both the historical phenomenon and the concept of digitization in the fields of GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums), as well as GLAM-related research in other academic disciplines. Snelson's work is evident even in the introduction to the index, where it endeavours to account for the many ways the book can be read and the many ways this index can function for us, in different material contexts.

The Little Database is, in addition, an important contribution to how we as researchers need to approach our datafied society, not in just following the loud promises of what "big data" can give us, but rather in understanding and

approaching our smaller collections of data, of little databases everywhere, and how they affect what they organize. For this reason, Snelson calls the little database an "integral model" for understanding our contemporary society and culture (2025: 2), and the study of these models is also integral to making visible the effects of digitization, through the vectors of computation, preservation, transmission, and contingent reading. Here, accounting for the relations between file formats, circuits of transmission and distribution, database contexts, and sites of use. Artifacts appear as digital objects, within a set of "historically contingent and contextually networked databases" (2025: 15).

As is also typical of many strains of contemporary humanistic research, a new materialist-inspired approach is brought together with the infrastructural turn in the humanities: the shift to studying the inner workings of digital infrastructure and formats (Chun 2008). Our contemporary databases exist in a space between preservation and distribution i.e., between storage and transmission. As many practitioners and scholars in GLAM and GLAM-adjacent fields are aware of, they configure the contemporary experience of historical artefacts, as well as the interpretive methods available for the study of the artefacts in these databases (2025: 7), an important part of the collections-as-data movement found in the GLAM-sector today, and which much digital humanities research is built on.

The concept of the database is fittingly taken from the much-cited cultural theorist Lev Manovich and defined as "any organized collection of data" (2025: 9), and any analysis employing the concept must include how the database organizes, stores, indexes, displays, and manipulates (2025: 9). Furthermore, Snelson relies on a theoretical framework encompassing many of the most central names in both the humanities in general, and the humanistic strains of the interdisciplinary GLAM research fields in particular. This includes established concepts, conceptual developments, and ideas from thinkers such as Hayles (objects are not static, but dynamic assemblages), Liu (critique of information management practices), McGann (on textuality and material hermeneutics), and Dworkin (radical formalism).

Snelson also introduces a very fruitful concept for the study of post-digital and contemporary networked culture: Saper's "sociopoetics" (2001). Applying this concept, the focus is shifted from the objects in the database to the database itself and its processes of distribution and compilation. This focus becomes a way for texts (or artifacts) to find and gain meaning through their distribution. The centrality of this term is so important that Snelson defines it twice, once in chapter 1 (2025: 27) and again in chapter 2 (2025: 75).

The methodological framework also fittingly borrows from a wide array of thinkers in new materialism, digital humanities, cultural theory, and critical data and code studies. All sharing a focus on forces making, rather than things made. An example of this is Snelson following Matthew Kirschenbaum's argument for the importance of archival approaches to the traces left by digital systems of circulation (2008), where networks reinscribe the works they circulate. In this way, the book is situated in the same theoretical and methodological framework of *Life After New Media – Mediation as a Vital Process* (Kember – Zylinska 2012), and their case for making cuts at different scales, focusing on the processes of mediation rather than on stabilized objects. It seemed a missed opportunity not to be in conversation with this work, when they complement each other so well.

The book is divided into four chapters, in addition to an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction serves as an entry way to thinking of all the ways our lives contain little databases as organized data and files for our own personal use. Snelson makes a compelling argument for how the datafied society today – or information environment, as he calls it – is not just big data, but also little databases. From this follows that understanding the logics of the little database is just as important as working with big data, when researching our contemporary society.

The epilogue drives down an additional point, and this is that no matter how much we think of the digital as standardised and protocolled (or platformed, as it is so often expressed with synonymous intent today), so many little databases are idiosyncratic in their making. This points to how little databases are inherently man-made artifacts, even when existing as services for a multitude of users. Likewise, new infrastructural changes, such as going from transmission through downloading to transmission through streaming, affect the practice of personal archiving, shifting power relations, and introducing new contingencies into reading files and databases. The creation of a playlist on Spotify can serve as such a contemporary example. With the guidance of the analysis in the previous chapters in the book, we can help make sense of it as an organizer of culture as data, a rendition of a little database, now encased in larger *platform* databases.

Each chapter in *The Little Database* focuses on a digitized version of a specific media type format, from text (chapter 1), image (of text) (chapter 2), sound (chapter 3), and video (chapter 4). Chapter one focuses on the computation of digital text and the text file, while Chapter 2 focuses on modes of preservation and new ways of circulation when changing the modes of reading historical cultural artifacts as they are presented as new digitized editions. Chapter 3 deals

with transmission, with a close reading of the circulations of artifacts as digitized objects across multiple databases. Chapter 4 has a different focus, scaling down to reading the database through the objects in it. Three specific movies found in this database are analysed through a sociopoetic method of close reading, with a focus on the aspect of dispersion.

For each of the four chapters, an interlude is included. The interludes are textual descriptions of different cases of artistic research, examples of how to perform the same argument as the preceding chapter, but through producing a media-reflexive work. These interludes serve as examples of what many media-influenced humanities scholars before him have argued; it is in the media-reflexive works of art and literature that a particular media or technology is made visible and explored for all its contingencies, in this case revealing the effects of digitization.

Each of the four main chapters also touches upon a larger debate related to our datafied culture. Chapter 1 includes a discussion of what these little databases should be defined as in terms related to how they fulfil roles of preserving, organizing, and distributing digital objects. This opens up for a good discussion and review of the differences between a collection, a (digital) library, an (online) archive (or rogue archive!), an anthology, and an arsenal. This reveals how the historical contingencies of these terms are all challenged by a datafied society and a networked culture.

Chapter 2 expands upon the access to different file formats, their specificity, and the ephemerality of the digital condition in general, tied in with the tension between preservation and distribution. Digital archives act as active forces in redistribution to put into new circulations in the sociopoetic networks of the present, yet cannot escape the aspects of the digital condition. This is even more striking, given that the database case study in question is partly only available through the Internet Archive today.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the different ways that works circulate, the effects their temporary storage in different databases gives, and how this affects our interface with them even when the file format remains consistent. One question looms in the background of this chapter: How does the organization affect both circulation and experience? Harking back to the previous chapter, this also means we have to contemplate that a remediation changes something from being discrete in one format to becoming non-discrete in a new digital format.

Last, chapter 4 shows how media-reflexive works can amplify the effects of digitization, particularly the networked effects of digitization. The relevance of intertextuality is reasserted, but intertextuality is also reconfigured through how

the organization of data in databases creates intertextual relations. As such, it connects to the age-old question of how we critique cultural artifacts.

The Little Database does require a certain prerequisite knowledge of file types and data types to be fully appreciated. Undoubtedly, scholars in the same field in which this book situates itself will have an easier time understanding the descriptions of file types, data, protocols, scripts, and the acts of encoding and decoding. All technical terms we are used to dealing with in the digital humanities but might appear less straightforward if the reader is situated in, e.g., the sociology of literature. But overall, the book still serves as a good example for academics and students in general for how to methodologically and archivally approach personal collections and smaller culture organization projects.

The book is mainly concerned with dealing with the creations coming out of Web 1.0, or what is left of Web 1.0, in Web 2.0. This makes sense, as the latter part of Web 2.0 is recognized as a post-digital epoch in internet history (Cramer: 2015), where data infrastructures are mundane and hidden, buried deep in layers upon layers of platformed content management systems. So, while it offers "a range of tactics to read cultural history through playful engagements with the contingent networks of the present" (2025: 21), it shies away from grappling with a lot of our own reconfigured little databases of Web 2.0. From the partly user-generated new media archives on Instagram and Tumblr to the playlist on Spotify.

There exists a missed opportunity in how to create links between the sociopoetical mode of reading in periodicals, to the *Eclipse* digital collection, to the new media archives of social media (a concept defined by Beer (2013)), which creates new databases for contemporary pop poetry, such as instapoetry. For instance, one of the main ways of distribution and storage of single poems is currently championed by participatory culture on Instagram in conjunction with the search and sorting algorithms there. Here, the intrusiveness of saves and list-functions on contemporary platforms, combined with the influence of participatory culture, facilitates the repurposing of larger standardized systems to create our own little databases within databases. Similarly, the DIY archives made by fans on Tumblr, repurposing functions of the platform, is yet another such example. These relations between smaller and larger databases are, in many ways, essential today in understanding how artifacts circulate as digital objects. On the other hand, this yearning for a chapter on this topic also speaks to the book's importance in creating space for these further arguments. Sometimes, judging a book by what it lacks is more effective if we treat it as an invitation to consider what it opens up for thought and how it might be used.

As its predecessors in *Electronic Mediations*, it has the makings of a central book in the fields of archives, libraries, and museums, and the (critical) digital humanities in general. Not least, it also contributes significantly to the field of artistic practice and research. It is an essential book in covering what to make of formats, databases, as well as digital (and digitized) objects in new environments. It showcases the craft of how to analyse the organizational parts that make up our world, a necessary method to be able to wield for anyone who wishes to excel in the study of contemporary culture and/or GLAM-related research, such as digital cultural heritage.

REFERENCES

Beer, D.
    2013 *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Bogost, I.
    2015 *How to Talk About Video Games.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Chun, W.
    2008 "The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory", *Critical Inquiry* 35:1, 148-171.
Cramer, F.
    2015 "What Is 'Post-digital'?" In: D.M. Berry & M. Dieter (eds.), *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 12-26
Emerson, L.
    2014 *Reading Writing Interfaces*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Ernst, W.
    2012 *Digital Memory and the Archives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Hayles, N.K. – Pressman, J.
    2013 *Comparative Textual Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Ihde, D.
    2001 *Bodies in Technology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Janich, P.
    2018 *What Is Information?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Kember, S. – Zylinska, J.
    2012 *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*. The MIT Press.
Kirschenbaum, M.
    2008 *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
Parikka, J.
    2015 *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Saper, C.J.
  2001 *Networked art.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Schäfer, M.T. – van Es, K.
  2017 *The Datafied Society. Studying Culture through Data.* Amsterdam University
       Press.

CAMILLA HOLM SOELSETH

Oslo Metropolitan University
camil@oslomet.no
ORCID code: 0000-0003-2745-2608