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fondata da Roberta Mullini

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Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione,
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Hiatus Resolution in Non-Rhotic English: An Optimality Theoretic Account

ABSTRACT

Hiatus occurs when two vowels occur in adjacent syllables. Within the Optimality Theory (OT), hiatus-breaking has been a contentious and controversial topic which has been largely examined in phonology. This paper reviews, from a theoretical standpoint, hiatus resolution strategies under the lens of Optimality Theory and focuses on hiatus-breaking in non-rhotic English varieties. The theoretical evaluation of /r/, glides and glottal stops as potential epenthetic consonants reveals that the optimal candidate to resolve hiatus in non-rhotic English is /r/, such as /r/ intrusion or linking /r/ due to phonetic properties and sonority. Hence, the pronunciation of *law is* as [lɔ:rɪz] is not to be considered as a 'mistake', as the insertion of /r/ can be phonologically explained.

KEYWORDS: phonology; hiatus resolution; non-rhotic English; language variation; Optimality Theory.

1. Introduction

Students who acquire English as a foreign language learn to read differently from children in English-dominant societies (Hou & Wang, 2017). Indeed, English language reading is challenging for EFL students, as the English writing alphabetic system does not represent the phonological structure of the language, hence phonological decoding skills are required. However, in some EFL contexts, learners are not often exposed to oral English (Gunderson, 2014), owing to an emphasis on language instruction which remains firmly on grammar (Milton, 2009). Linking graphemes – the smallest functional unit of a writing system (e.g. <t> in *what*) – to phones – the actual pronunciation of a specific sound (e.g. /t/ realised as a glottal stop in *what*) - is found to be effective on early literary skills among young students in western societies (Hou & Wang, 2017). Shen (2003) suggests that phonemic awareness, along with alphabetic principles, should be explicitly taught by teachers in schools. The present paper draws the attention on some phonological features which are not etymologically present, but occur at a phonological level, and thus might generate confusion amongst EFL learners. Before describing the phonological processes involved in hiatus-breaking, I shall firstly provide a brief overview of hiatus.

2. Description of hiatus

Hiatus-breaking has been extensively studied by a wide number of phonologists and has been a debatable and controversial issue within the Optimality Theory (OT). Hiatus takes place when two vowels occur in adjacent syllables (McCarthy, 1993), and one of the most common strategies to resolve hiatus is the insertion of an epenthetic consonant. In the standard accent of British English (i.e. Received Pronunciation - RP) hiatus can be prevented with the use of linking /ɹ/, e.g. *far away* à /fɑɹ əˈweɪ/, intrusive /ɹ/, e.g. *law and order* à [lɔɹənd] (Uffman, 2007), the insertion of a palatal glide, e.g. *seeing* à [sijiŋ] (McCarthy, 1993), and with the indefinite article *an*, e.g. *an oak* vs. *a tree*. It is argued that linking /ɹ/ and intrusive /ɹ/ are the favoured hiatus resolution strategies (Wells, 1982; McCarthy, 1993), however, besides these phenomena, I will also review the role of glides and glottal stops as potential hiatus fillers. This paper (a) provides some remarks

on the terminology of rhoticity distinguishing between rhotic vs. non-rhotic accents, linking /r/ vs. intrusive /r/; (b) provides an overview of Optimality Theory; (c) takes into account the sonority scale in order to evaluate the most plausible hiatus breaker (Orgun, 2001), and (d) discusses whether glides and glottal stops could be also classified as possible epenthetic consonants.

3. Rhoticity, linking /r/, and intrusive /r/

This section discusses what is meant by rhoticity, linking /r/, intrusive /r/ and briefly focuses on both phonetic and phonotactic qualities of the approximant /r/. The phonetic quality and the phonotactic distribution of (r) are both variable. The alveolar approximant [ɹ] is the most common realisation (Cruttenden, 1980), whereas [ɾ] is typically found in conservative RP, especially in intervocalic position (Foulkes & Docherty, 2007) as well as in northern dialects (e.g. Shorrocks). Traditional NE dialects have uvular /ʁ/, giving back quality to vowels and diphthongs which historically precede /r/ (e.g. *work* à /wɜːk/ à /wɔːk/).[1] In phonotactic terms, the variability concerns the realisation or absence of (r), distinguishing between rhotic vs. non-rhotic varieties. Rhoticity (i.e. the realisation of /r/) is preserved in all linguistic environments and carries social prestige in American English dialects, Scotland, Ireland (Foulkes & Docherty, 2007). Conversely, dialects spoken in England (except for rhotic dialects spoken in South West England), Wales, Australasia, and South Africa are non-rhotic. In non-rhotic accents, /r/ is retained in speaker's lexical representation, yet it is phonetically absent in non-prevocalic environments (e.g. *hard* à /hɑːd/, *car park* à /kɑː pɑːk/) (Cox, et al. 2014). The decline of rhoticity in many British English accents occurred between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, generating two phonological processes: linking /r/ and intrusive /r/. While R Dropping was operating on underlying forms containing /r/, a new generation of speakers started to insert /r/ (i.e. [ɹ]) in environments where /r/ was not underlyingly present (Wells, 1982). Linking /r/ is defined as the realisation of /r/ in coda position when followed by a vowel, as in *fa[r] away*,

[1] See Foulkes & Docherty (2007) for a more exhaustive account of the phonetic quality of (r).

fou[r] apples. This natural phonological process exhibits little social variation, except for Newcastle where results revealed that linking /r/ is significantly not present in the speech of working-class speakers and among the young generation (Foulkes, 1997). Intrusive /r/ (i.e. the insertion of /r/ even when there is no etymological /r/) is widespread in RP and in many other accents of England, even though it is often stigmatised. This phenomenon seems to occur only in non-rhotic dialects and applies across a morpheme or word boundary, as well as after acronyms, and operates as follows:

Ø à r / [-high V] _ # V (Wells, 1982).

In other words, in hiatus environments, non-high vowels (i.e. mid and open vowels) acquire an epenthetic /r/ which is etymologically not required, as in *saw [r] it*.[2]

4. A brief overview of Optimality Theory

Optimality Theory, proposed by Prince & Smolensky in the early 1990s, is an output-based model where the input is retrieved in the output. OT assumes that language is governed by a set of violable constraints on possible forms, with the assumption that for each input there are possible outputs, but only the most logical ones will be considered (e.g. [dɒ̲g] as an input of /kæt/ would be illogical). However, each output can potentially have an infinitive number of inputs. The pioneers of the theory assumed that the constraints are universal, and that the more highly ranked a constraint, the more serious a violation is. Table 1 displays a typical layout of an OT representation, in which Cand 1 is not the optimal candidate as it incurs the serious violation of constraint (CON1); Cand 2 violates one constraint (CON2) which is ranked higher than CON3, thus Cand 2 loses, and the optimal candidate remains Cand3.

[2] R-insertion has also been found word-internally, as in *gnawing* [ˈnɔːrɪŋ] (Cruttenden, 1962).

/input/	CON1	CON2	CON3
CAND1	*		*
CAND2		*	
☞CAND3			**

Table 1. OT representation

The three principal components of OT are: a universal generator (GEN), constraints (CON) and an evaluator (EVAL). GEN generates potential candidates of a given input; CON provides specific criteria which aim at selecting the winner candidate, as each constraint is likely to be violated; and EVAL identifies the optimal candidate resulting in the final output.

OT constraints can be classified in two broad categories: *Faithfulness* (phonemic contrast) constraints and *Markedness* (structural) constraints. *Faithfulness* prohibits any distinction between input and output, and the input is not altered in the surface form. McCarthy (2008) proposed two principal faithfulness restrictions, namely MAXIMALITY[14] (MAX) and DEPENDENCY (DEP), which restricts against epenthesis and deletion, respectively.

(1) MAX strictly entails any item in the input to have an equivalent in the output.
(2) DEP guards that an item present in the output must have a correspondent in the input.

IDENTITY constraint is to be considered as an alternative segmental restriction, linked to faithfulness, and elements in the input are preserved in the output.

Markedness was originally explored by Trubetzkoy (1939), and then reviewed by Jakobson (1941) who provided a divergent interpretation of this concept as well as the first perception of naturalness of human language. He claims that a less marked sound appears earlier in language acquisition by children, and its frequency is likely to unfold in the world's languages. This notion has also been considered by Stampe (1969/1972) in the theory of *Natural Phonology*, suggesting that the natural process, also known as *unmarked*, is due to an ease of articulation. The adult grammar, during the acquisition phase, may take different

paths, which have been re-echoed in OT. One of the principal differences between Natural Phonology and OT is that Natural Phonology views both child and adult phonology as the result of applied substitution rules, whereas OT accounts for the downgrade of markedness restriction ranking, originally higher, to the advantage of faithfulness constraints. In OT, a superiority of the markedness over faithfulness constraints means that all languages are associated with an analogous inventory. Even when obfuscated by faithfulness, the markedness restriction tends to emerge in diachronic changes in the so-called *emergence of the unmarked* (McCarthy & Prince, 1994).

5. /r/ as an Epenthetic Consonant

This section explores /r/ as a possible hiatus resolution under the lens of OT, according to which constraints are in principle violable at the surface structure (Prince & Smolensky, 1993). The examination of the non-rhotic Eastern Massachusetts dialect, carried out by McCarthy (1993), suggests that (3) /r/ is not allowed in coda-condition and (4) sequences of adjacent heterosyllabic vowels are forbidden.

(3) *V*r*X]σ CODA-COND
(4) *V]σ [σ V NO-HIATUS.

The first restriction (3) demonstrates that /r/ is dropped in coda environments, whilst the second restriction (4) shows the plausibility for the insertion of /r/ in order to resolve hiatus. Since restriction (4) is violated in the Eastern Massachusetts dialect, McCarthy (1993) proposed an alternative constraint: FINAL-C. This requires a consonant or a glide in final position, and /r/ intrusion is considered as a resolution strategy rather than an obstacle on hiatus. Similarly, Antilla and Cho (1998) adopted the same technique, but they replaced FINAL-C with the ONSET constraint. Linking /r/ and intrusive /r/ were found to occur in word + clitic collocation (*Timor is…, Cuba is…*) as well as after reduced function words, but, in Eastern Massachusetts, /r/ insertion is not found after the following reduced function words: *wanna, gonna, coulda, shoulda, etc.* (McCarthy, 1993). /r/ intrusion may occur after a lexical word (analogous to

prosodic words), on condition that the last item of a prosodic word is a consonant or a glide.

Kahn (1976) proposed that consonants in coda position are ambysillabic when followed by an adjacent vowel. Indeed, in the examples *Wanda [r] arrived* or *saw [r] eels*, intrusive /r/ satisfies both FINAL-C and ONSET (Kahn, 1976). It is argued that smooth /r/ has phonetic properties of *linking* and *intrusive /r/,* which seems to confirm the necessity of the FINAL-C constraint, as the NO-HIATUS restriction forces the insertion on the onset, but it might not determine the proper breaker segment. Kahn (1976) and McCarthy (1993) argue that epenthesis of a default vowel can satisfy CODA-COND, but not FINAL-C. Indeed, *Homer [ə] left* seems not to be a plausible solution, and the output is characterised by *Home <r> left.* On the other hand, *Wand <a> left* could be a further potential candidate, but it violates PARSE-V. The latter prohibits the presence of a stray vowel and it is the equivalent of MAX in the Correspondence Theory (McCarthy & Prince, 1995).

Uffman (2007) rejects the presence of underlying /r/ as, viewed through the lens of the Principle of Richness of the Base (Prince & Smolensky, 1993), potential output forms are characterised by output constraints only, regardless the input constraints. Uffman (2007) challenges the fact that underlying /r/ is a form that precedes non-high vowels, arguing that it should be considered as a violation of the previously mentioned OT principle, since /r/ does not occur in the input. Sebregts (2001) noticed that intrusive [r] was also found in loanwords, such as *pasta, UEFA*, which do not contain /r/ in the input form. Even though the position of /r/ as an epenthetic consonant has been treated as being phonologically arbitrary and an unnatural process (McCarthy, 1993), Uffman (2007) contends that intrusive /r/[3] is not synchronically arbitrary, yet it is a natural process.

Harries (1994) suggested that floating /r/ is used in onset environments when no segment can fill hiatus, however, this claim appears not to be in line with McCarthy's argument, as /r/ cannot form an onset. Halle & Idsardi (1997) proposed two rules: 1) /r/ is dropped in the rhyme of the syllable; 2) epenthetic /r/ is acquired by non-high word final vowels, followed by a vowel initial syllable. They argue that intrusive /r/ can be considered as a form of hypercorrection, whilst linking /r/ is due to the failure of rule 1. Hay & Sudbury (2005) argue

against the rule inversion as their historical New Zealand English (NZE) suggest both partial rhoticity and /r/ insertion.

6. Sonority hierarchy

From the viewpoint of sonority, Orgun (2001) suggests that coda consonants are more sonorous than the adjacent onset, therefore the proposed sonority hierarchy, which is based on markedness scale for peaks, is as follows:

(4) *Coda-t >> *Coda-n >> *Coda-r >> *Coda-w.

Uffman (2007) argues that /r/ is an optimal epenthetic consonant as it satisfies the faithfulness constraint according to which the less is inserted, the more faithful the output is to the input. Moreover, a maximally sonorous segment is usually inserted in intervocalic environment. When glide formation is blocked, /r/ is inserted as it is the most sonorous segment. In edge environments, minimally sonorous elements are considered unmarked and they can function as epenthesis (e.g. glottal stop), whereas in different contexts (e.g. intervocalically) maximally sonorous segments can function as optimal epenthesis. In other words, the sonority scale, markedness and faithfulness prompt /r/ insertion in environments where glides are blocked. The non-arbitrariness of intrusive /r/ in hiatus environments is not an isolated phenomenon, in both English and German, but it is triggered by prosodic factors.

7. Glides and Glottal Stops as Epenthetic Consonants

McCarthy (1993) pointed out that /r/ is not the only strategy to resolve hiatus in the English language. The glide [w] can be followed by high back vowels, whereas [j] occurs after high front vowels. Glide insertion is treated as a plausible hiatus resolution as they are minimally contrastive and are minimally marked epenthetic consonants. Moreover, glides make the inserted element as similar to the preceding vowel as possible (Uffmann, 2002). Indeed, if the roundness and backness of vowels is taken into account, [w] is found after [u, ʊ], whilst [j], in hiatus contexts, is followed by [i, ɪ] (Sagey, 1986; Clements, 1991), as shown in the following sentences:

(5) The key is [ki:**j**ɪz]
(6) The zoo is [zu:**w**ɪz]
(7) The law is [lɔ:**ɹ**ɪz]

In both (5) and (6), glides can successfully avoid hiatus. However, in (7) a potential epenthetic glide is blocked by the preceding vowel whose features are [+ round] and [+back]. The Geometry Feature suggests that the non-high back rounded vowel [ɔ], as in (7), may spread, but the result is not permitted in English as the non-high glide formation may be expressed by the vowel [ɤ] - a segment which cannot occur in the English language. Both ONSET and DEP, as illustrated in the following table, determine whether epenthesis can occur in hiatus contexts.

/lɔ:ɪz/	ONSET	*G[-h]	DEP(hi)	DEP	*V_V/lar	*V_V/r	*V_V/V
[lɔ:ɪz]	*!						
[lɔ:wɪz]			*!	*			*
[lɔ:ɤɪz]				*			*
[lɔɹɪz]				*		*	
[lɔ:ʔɪz]				*	*!		

Table 2. OT representation of the input [lɔ:ɪz](Uffman, 2007).

The first candidate of the above table, [lɔ:ɪz], has to be excluded as it violates ONSET; the second candidate, [lɔ:wɪz], violates DEP(hi) as only the place feature spreads; the third candidate, [lɔ:ɤɪz], cannot be accepted as it violates the non-high glides restriction discussed above, thus glides are ruled out[3]. The glottal stop is inserted to maximise the contrast to the following vowel (Uffman, 2007)

[3] Several linguists have suggested that /ɹ/ should be classified as a glide, due to the [low] and [pharingeal] features (Gnanadesikan, 1997). Broadbent (1996), attempted to explain that /ɹ/ corresponds to low vowels, yet it is not clear that other languages adopt the same strategy when confronted, in hiatus environment, with a low vowel. Gick (2002) argues that, within the Government Phonology framework, /ɹ/ is a natural correspondent of schwa.

and can be a frequent epenthetic consonant as it only violates the *PHARYNGEAL constraint (Lombardi, 1990). However, the above table suggests that [ʔ] in [lɔːʔɪz] is excluded from potential epenthesis due to the violations incurred, leaving the insertion of /ɾ/ - the nearest element to glides on the markedness scale - as the only resolution strategy to resolve hiatus, as in [lɔɾɪz]. In many languages, the glottal stop occurs in a strong position, it functions as a hiatus breaker before a stressed context in German and Dutch and occurs as an obligatory onset in Arabic. In English, however, the glottal stop is an allophone of /t/ which is commonly found in weak positions[4]. Whereas, in strong positions /t/ is more likely to be aspirated. Davidson & Erker (2014) show that, in rhotic American English, hiatus can be tolerated word-medially, whereas at word-boundaries it is preferred to resolve hiatus with glottal stop insertion, when it occurs before unstressed syllables. In Australian English, linking /ɾ/ is frequently found in hiatus environments where the first vowel is non-high and the second vowel is weak (Cox et al., 2014). Penney et al. (2024) suggest that glottalisation occurs most frequently with strong right-edge vowels, and gliding/linking-r are more likely with weak right-edge vowels.

8. Conclusion

This paper has evaluated the different hiatus-breaking strategies in non-rhotic English and has theoretically reviewed the role of /ɾ/, glides and glottal stop as potential epenthetic consonants. Among the different argumentations provided by phonologists throughout the years, McCarthy pointed out that epenthesis, in hiatus environment, is satisfied by the FINAL-C constraint. Along this line, Antilla & Co (1998) developed a similar argument where FINAL-C was replaced with the ONSET constraint. Kahn (1976) suggested that consonants in coda position are ambysillabic when followed by adjacent vowels, and the necessity of /ɾ/ intrusion or linking /ɾ/ is due to phonetic properties. The most plausible explanation seems to be provided by Uffman (2007) who explained that /ɾ/ is

[4] The stress pattern found in East Anglian English, for word-medial /t/, suggests that unstressed syllables containing /t/ favour glottal(ised) variants, whereas syllables with primary stress disfavour glottals (Ciancia, 2020).

the optimal epenthetic consonant due to sonority, whereas glottal stops and glides are both excluded as potential epenthetic consonants. Empirical findings form rhotic American English, however, do not rule out glottal stop insertion to resolve hiatus (Davidson & Erker, 2014).

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"L'Oceano in calma": Monti, *Paradise Lost* e l'Italia

ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of Italy for Milton's personal and intellectual formation, strong critical biases have characterized the reception of Milton in Italy between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the homeland of Catholicism and under the strong influence of classicism, Milton's *Paradise Lost* seemed too unorthodox to meet the cultural expectations of Italian readership. Vincenzo Monti's appreciation of Milton's visionary imagination in his *Discorso preliminare* (1779) and his adaptation of *Paradise Lost* 7 in his creation poem *La bellezza dell'universo* (1781), through Paolo Rolli's well-known Italian translation (1742), are particularly worthy of notice in this context. As a site of intersection between Italian censorial practices and aesthetic criticism, notably around the sublime, *La bellezza dell'universo* offers unique access to Milton's reception over the eighteenth century, a period in which *Paradise Lost* achieved canonical acceptance at the cost of selective re-creation.

KEYWORDS: Vincenzo Monti, John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, sublime, Italian reception

1. Monti e i modelli di sublimità

A partire dalla sua formazione e nella sua prima carriera poetica, Vincenzo Monti esprime un forte interesse per la forza creativa dell'immaginazione e per la parola sublime in grado di suscitare entusiasmo[1]. Tenendo a mente la lezione longiniana, Monti individua il sublime innanzitutto nella grandiosità delle immagini e delle rappresentazioni. In una nota alla *Bassvilliana* (1793), l'autore scrive: "Che diremo dell'elmo di Pallade nel quinto dell'Iliade, sufficiente a coprire un esercito tratto da cento città? La poesia ama molto di vestire le idee astratte d'immagini allegoriche e sensibili" (Monti 1839, 85)[2]. Sviluppando gli spunti offerti dal testo longiniano e influenzato da Gravina e da Vico (Costa 1992, 103), il giovane poeta di Alfonsine legge Omero e Pindaro come esempi di grandiosità. Ancora più significativo il fatto che, sulla scorta del *fiat lux* longiniano[3], ritenga la poesia delle Scritture la più rappresentativa del sublime. Tuttavia, egli riconosce che questa capacità di pensare per immagini grandiose non appartenga soltanto agli antichi[4]. Anche fra gli autori moderni è possibile trovare una tale forza dell'immaginazione, soprattutto in coloro che si ispirano più fedelmente al modello della poesia biblica:

> Perciò vediamo in Milton l'Eterno Geometra prender in mano il compasso, centrarlo nell'immensità del caos, e girarlo per circoscrivere l'universo. Così nei profeti il Divino Architetto misura le acque del globo nel cavo della mano, compassa il cielo colla spanna, pesa le montagne nella bilancia; e cent'altri pensieri di questo genere

[1] Lo studio della prima poetica di Monti non può prescindere da Colicchia 1961. Per la concezione del sublime nella carriera montiana si vedano Mineo 1992, Finotti 1998, Frassineti 2009, 87-119 e 2011, Bertazzoli 2005 e 2015.

[2] Per l'interpretazione del sublime nella *Bassvilliana*, di cui si è scelto di non occuparsi in questa sede, si vedano i due diversi studi di Costa 1992 e Mineo 1992, 78-90.

[3] Sulla *querelle* del sublime che si sviluppa dalla polemica sul *fiat lux* ("sia la luce, e luce fu" *Sul sublime* 9.9; *Gen* 1,3) e che vede al centro la traduzione del trattato longiniano di Boileau (1674), cfr. Saint Girons 2003, 36-38; Doran 2015, 115-120.

[4] In una delle sue "Riflessioni sulla poesia lirica" del 1781, Monti aveva dichiarato: "forse gli antichi hanno esaurito il bello della poesia? […] Che gli antichi siano stati eccellenti in tutto ciò che han fatto, specialmente in poesia, sono d'accordo: ma che solamente ad essi sia stato accordato il privilegio di scriver bene né abbiano lasciato ai posteri alcun campo intatto in materia di gusto, questa è una follia" (Pasini 1910, 29).

> maraviglioso e sublime, unico linguaggio con cui la debole immaginazione può slanciarci verso l'onnipotenza, e delibarne l'idea. (Monti 1839, 85)

In questa osservazione rivelatrice, Monti fornisce la chiave di lettura per interpretare la sua inclinazione per l'estetica del sublime e fare confluire il testo biblico con l'immaginazione di un autore moderno e straniero come John Milton. Già nel 1778 quando lascia Ferrara per raggiungere Roma, su invito del cardinale Borghese, Monti è alimentato da una sensibilità verso una poesia dell'entusiasmo e del sublime biblico, con cui si apre alla produzione letteraria moderna, non strettamente domestica, come quella inglese e tedesca. Ne è testimonianza lo scambio epistolare con Clementino Vannetti, nei confronti del quale si trova in profondo disaccordo relativamente all'imitazione dei modelli stranieri[5]. In una lettera indirizzata all'amico classicista, datata 10 gennaio 1783, Monti esorta ad avere "il coraggio di dire che anche le estere nazioni han dei buoni poeti, che fa d'uopo leggere e ammirare" (Bertoldi 1929, 209). Piuttosto che allontanare la letteratura d'Oltralpe, sarebbe opportuno prendere le distanze da quel "gregge dei servili imitatori" (*ibid.*), composto da mediocri autori italiani, che producono soltanto poesia di scarso valore. Bisogna, invece, ammettere che vi sono esempi da lodare anche nelle letterature straniere:

> Se voi non convenite meco di questo, gettate al fuoco David, Isaia, Ezechiello e tutti gli altri profeti, le cui immagini e pensieri ed espressioni sono ben più stravaganti di quelle del Klopstock e del Milton. La mia conclusione è che vi stimo assaissimo quando inveite contro certi nostri poeti, e che altrettanto vi biasimo quando tentate di degradar quelli d'Alemagna e di Londra. (*ibid.*)[6]

[5] Per l'importanza del carteggio con lo studioso roveretano si vedano Schweizer 1998 e Calitti 2001.
[6] In una lettera precedente del 3 giugno 1780, Monti si lamentava dei giudizi di Vannetti e di Saverio Bettinelli sulla poesia straniera: "Sono d'accordo con voi e con Bettinelli che la maggior parte dei nostri poeti, sedotta dalla novità transalpina, è insoffribile; v'accordo anche che gli esemplari tedeschi, inglese, francesi sono la fonte di tanta corruttela. Ma bisogna che anche voi mi accordiate che il gregge di questi nostri poeti intedescati, infranciosati è un gregge di talenti mediocri e puerili. Dov'è quel buon poeta che, meditando questi medesimi esemplari, cada nelle debolezze di costoro? Il morbo adunque da cui l'Italia è inondata è colpa dei nostri poeti, e non dei tedeschi. Essi fanno uso di tutta la energia della loro lingua, come fa ognuno della propria, e sarebbe un'ingiustizia il giudicare delle opere loro sotto una mal cucita veste italiana" (Bertoldi 1929, 119).

In merito alla sua ammirazione per la poesia moderna d'Oltralpe, è degno di menzione l'interesse di Monti nei confronti di Milton all'interno del panorama culturale italiano, tutt'altro che favorevole al capolavoro poetico di *Paradise Lost* (1674). Pur ammettendo la straordinarietà di Milton e del suo testo, gli scrittori e gli intellettuali italiani (e non solo) da sempre nutrivano un estremo riserbo verso la sua eccessiva libertà immaginativa e stilistica e, soprattutto, la sua radicalità politica e religiosa. Lo scopo del presente contributo è portare alla luce la ricezione ambivalente del sublime miltoniano di Vincenzo Monti agli inizi della sua carriera poetica il quale, da una parte, mostra profondo apprezzamento per il poeta inglese, dall'altra, riflette la tradizione censoria italiana che stempera gli aspetti più audaci della sua opera. Monti, infatti, non esita nel mostrarsi estimatore di Milton e della potenza immaginifica della sua poesia sia sul piano teorico-critico, nel *Discorso preliminare* al suo *Saggio di poesie* (1779), sia su quello strettamente poetico-stilistico in *La bellezza dell'universo* (1781), dove il racconto della creazione nell'epica miltoniana (libro settimo) diviene un vero e proprio ipotesto per costruire la sublimità della cantica. Eppure, la ricezione del poema inglese non è così lineare, a partire dal fatto che Monti si serve della famosa traduzione italiana di Paolo Antonio Rolli, *Il Paradiso perduto* (1742), anziché dell'opera originale, non leggendo in lingua inglese: una traduzione che, per quanto avesse tentato di restare fedele al testo di partenza, nell'esito finale si rivelava più vicina al pubblico di arrivo, non solo per effetto della censura, ma soprattutto a causa della profonda influenza di Joseph Addison e della sua interpretazione del *Paradise Lost*, volta a mediare, in un garbato equilibrio, tra l'ammirazione per la sublimità dell'opera miltoniana e lo stemperamento delle sue eccentricità.

L'alta considerazione di Monti per Milton è un fattore noto già alla critica italiana di fine Ottocento. Nei suoi studi *Sulle poesie di Vincenzo Monti*, Bonaventura Zumbini osserva che "il Monti ebbe per due grandi poemi moderni, quali sono il «Paradiso perduto» e il «Messia», tanta ammirazione, quanta nessun altro degli scrittori nostri ebbe mai per i capolavori delle letterature straniere" (1886, 3), aggiungendo che "egli ragionava come il Milton stesso, il quale era d'avviso che nessun poema profano pareggiasse per nobiltà di soggetto e sublimità d'immagini quelli ispirati da Dio medesimo, e che, dunque, anche il poema sovrastasse a tutti gli altri delle classiche letterature" (*ibid.*, 5-6).

L'influenza del modello biblico confluisce nella *Bellezza dell'universo* con quella di Dante, di Tasso, ma soprattutto di Milton, del cui esempio Monti si avvale maggiormente [7]. Tuttavia, nella prassi, l'opera montiana tradisce una certa infedeltà nei riguardi dell'originale inglese. La ripresa di *Paradise Lost* nel poemetto, infatti, non avviene nel segno dominante della sublimità; piuttosto, l'immaginazione miltoniana è celebrata all'interno della forma armonica e ordinata della bellezza. La presenza miltoniana è, in altre parole, assorbita in un'estetica del bello classico che, sebbene si converta in un'immaginazione densa e contemplativa, non assume mai gli accenti eterodossi dell'originale. Laddove l'influenza del poema miltoniano spinge la bellezza della creazione ai margini della sublimità, questa si manifesta come potente ma ordinato atto divino. Ciò non dipende soltanto dalla sensibilità artistica di Monti, ma anche dalla sua ricezione dell'opera miltoniana attraverso la traduzione di Rolli, altresì mediata dalle teorie estetiche di Addison sul sublime in *Paradise Lost*. Per questa ragione, la predilezione di Monti per Milton è un interessante caso di ricezione. Da una parte, la poetica e la poesia del primo Monti stabiliscono uno splendido esempio di diffusione dell'opera di Milton nel Settecento italiano. Dall'altra, il processo di assimilazione del modello miltoniano avviene del tutto in linea sia con la ricezione italiana di *Paradise Lost*, che predilige soltanto alcune parti e/o aspetti del poema a svantaggio delle sue potenziali eterodossie, sia con l'operazione di selezione, più o meno radicale, con cui nel corso del diciottesimo secolo l'emergente teoria estetica moderna europea sminuisce o elimina i toni più estremi affinché l'opera miltoniana possa essere inclusa nel canone della poesia sublime.

Nell'intento di approfondire il ruolo svolto da Vincenzo Monti nella mediazione di *Paradise Lost* verso il pubblico italiano, la prima parte di questo saggio esamina il confronto iniziale dell'autore con la poesia di Milton, collocandolo nel contesto della rilevanza assunta da *Paradise Lost* nel dibattito

[7] L'opera miltoniana è fonte d'ispirazione sublime non soltanto per *La bellezza dell'universo*, ma anche per il poemetto *Prometeo* (1797), come aggiunge Zumbini: "Più volte il Monti trasse materia e forme dal poema miltoniano; e già ne accennai un insigne esempio nella sua «Bellezza dell'universo». Per il «Prometeo» poi ne tolse tutta la dipintura di una gran decadenza e di un gran riscatto dell'uman genere: la tolse più particolarmente dai due ultimi libri, dove Adamo, entrato in visione, contempla i tempi futuri, fino alla venuta del Messia" (1886, 107).

settecentesco sul sublime. La seconda parte, invece, prende in esame la fonte miltoniana per la *Bellezza dell'universo* – la traduzione di Paolo Rolli, *Il Paradiso perduto* – per poi ampliarsi nel tentativo di chiarire ciò che essa rivela in merito all'atteggiamento di Monti nei confronti di Milton. In quanto luogo di intersezione tra le pratiche censorie italiane e la critica addisoniana, in particolare attorno alla nozione di sublime, *La bellezza dell'universo* costituisce un osservatorio privilegiato per comprendere la ricezione di Milton nel corso del diciottesimo secolo tra Inghilterra e Italia.

2. John Milton, genio poetico del sublime moderno

Storicamente, i primi commenti e le osservazioni critiche sul *Paradise Lost* individuarono molto presto in Milton il padre del sublime moderno, in linea con il rinnovato interesse per il valore estetico di questo concetto nell'Inghilterra del diciottesimo secolo. Nel suo studio sulla ricezione miltoniana, James Thorpe afferma che il tratto più apprezzato di Milton dai critici del Settecento inglese era "his 'sublimity' – the capacity of his poetry to enlarge the imagination of the reader. 'Sublime' was the stock epithet" (1951, 6). Anche John Shawcross conferma che, fino alla fine del secolo, Milton rappresentava "still the exemplar of sublime and expression" (1972, 33). Da John Dennis e Joseph Addison, a Samuel Johnson e Jonathan Richardson, un numero considerevole di critici e intellettuali sosteneva che il *Paradise Lost* era da ritenere un esempio moderno di poesia sublime al pari dei modelli antichi per la sua capacità di suscitare passioni intense come la meraviglia e il terrore, per lo stile e il linguaggio elevati e, infine, per il soggetto a tema biblico. Nella sua rassegna più recente sulla ricezione di *Paradise Lost*, John Leonard identifica due linee di pensiero nel discorso settecentesco inglese. La prima, rappresentata da estimatori come Addison (1712), individua il sublime nell'effetto di grandiosità che le vicende del poema e le sue immagini evocano nel lettore. La seconda linea critica, che include Richardson (1734), Benson (1739) e Newton (1749), sottolinea "his metaphorical suggestiveness and verbal wit" (Leonard 2013, 3). Che sia per il linguaggio elevato e lo stile magniloquente oppure per la grandezza dei suoi effetti, i primi studi critici individuano nel *Paradise Lost* l'epitome del sublime poetico moderno.

Per le stesse motivazioni – uno stile grandioso, ma deviante dai canoni stilistici e metrici del genere epico classico, e un'immaginazione altrettanto eterodossa nei confronti della moralità cristiana – *Paradise Lost* era percepito con sospetto dai primi commentatori e traduttori italiani, fino ad alimentare una sorta di "cospirazione" (Borgogni 2015) nella storia della ricezione di Milton in Italia. Sebbene, ad esempio, Francesco Algarotti apprezzasse la "gigantesca sublimità Miltoniana" (1737, 4), trovava inappropriate le sue irregolarità stilistiche e metriche rispetto al modello epico; come pure la libertà che il poeta inglese aveva mostrato in materia teologica con l'invenzione di episodi come l'allegoria di *Sin* e *Death*. Condividendo le osservazioni dell'amico e corrispondente, Saverio Bettinelli riconobbe il valore supremo di Milton come poeta, "più ricco, più grande, più ardito inventore di sublimi imagini, di forti pensieri, e se ha più stravaganze, ha più bellezze e varietà eziandio" (1799, IV:313). Tuttavia, fu anche molto critico nei confronti della troppa libertà di immaginazione dell'autore inglese, "estremo nelle mostruosità e nelle sublimità del suo poema" (Bettinelli 1800, XII:179). Sotto l'influenza pervasiva della cultura francese e lo sguardo inquisitorio della Chiesa di Roma, la poesia sublime di Milton era considerata dagli italiani troppo poco ortodossa e irregolare dal punto di vista religioso, politico e stilistico (Borgogni 2017, 231). Di conseguenza, il poema divenne prevalentemente oggetto di censura, aggiustamenti e/o miglioramenti almeno fino alla metà del ventesimo secolo[8].

Eppure, nonostante la diffidenza nel panorama italiano verso questo autore rivoluzionario dal punto di vista letterario e ideologico, ci furono alcune eccezioni e, fra queste, vale la pena osservare con maggiore attenzione il giudizio positivo nei confronti di Milton da parte di Monti, soprattutto sul piano teorico-critico. Per comprendere la sensibilità di Monti in relazione alle categorie estetiche dell'entusiasmo e dell'immaginazione e la sua disposizione relativamente al sublime miltoniano è utile volgersi alle riflessioni poetiche contenute nel *Discorso preliminare* al suo *Saggio di poesie*, pubblicato nel 1779 e indirizzato a monsignore Ennio Quirino Visconti. In questo scritto dalle importanti ambizioni teoriche, il

[8] Le operazioni di censura e autocensura in Italia sull'opera di John Milton sono un argomento approfondito, soprattutto da un punto di vista traduttivo, da Brera 2013, Bignami 2014, Borgogni 2015 e 2017. Per uno studio più ampio sulla ricezione di Milton in Italia si vedano Di Cesare 1991 e Falcone 2016.

giovane Monti traccia un bilancio della poesia universale, antica e moderna, proponendo di distinguere la compagine degli autori, sulla base del criterio dell'immaginazione, tra coloro i quali la usano con troppa delicatezza e affettazione, nel timore di produrre grossolanità e imperfezione, e coloro che, invece, si lasciano trascinare dall'entusiasmo e dalla forza della fantasia inesauribile, generando disordine ma anche eccellenza:

> Una immaginazione delicata e gentile diverrà viziosa per troppa sottigliezza e raffinamento: all'incontro una immaginazione calda e profonda eccederà nella grandezza e nel disordine delle idee. […] Zappi, Rolli e cento francesi sono del primo carattere. Dante, Ariosto, Milton sono nel secondo. (Monti 1953, 1002)[9]

Se tra i primi è collocato Paolo Rolli, che Monti stima più come traduttore che come poeta, meritano piuttosto di figurare tra gli autori del secondo gruppo Omero e Dante per gli antichi, Milton e Klopstock per i moderni. Da queste premesse, l'autore del *Discorso preliminare* giunge al centro della sua argomentazione, ossia l'esaltazione della poesia biblica come modello assoluto di immaginazione corposa, visionaria e grandiosa: "così mi dichiaro ancor io di aver la mia bandiera di partito, e questa è la poesia degli Ebrei. […] Io amo dunque David più che gli altri poeti" (1004). Al rilievo assunto dalla tradizione davidica e salmodica nella poetica di Monti contribuiscono alcuni modelli settecenteschi della lirica ferrarese (Varano e Minzoni) sostenitori della poeticità dei soggetti vetero e neotestamentari (Frassineti 2009, 96; Bertazzoli 2005, 575) e, in generale, l'ammirazione per la poesia biblica che si radicalizza nella cultura italiana del diciottesimo secolo a partire da critici come Gianvincenzo Gravina o Biagio Garofalo, autore delle *Considerazioni intorno alla poesia degli Ebrei e dei Greci* (1701), testo anticipatore del lavoro di Robert Lowth, *De Sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753), sul sublime religioso in chiave longiniana (Costa 1992, 95). In particolare, è l'influenza dell'abate Alessandro Zorzi, ex-gesuita e autore di alcune *Riflessioni sulla verità poetica* (uscite postume a stampa nel 1779), in cui si sostiene l'efficacia sentimentale delle immagini del testo sacro, a orientare il giovane Monti verso il sublime biblico e ai modelli ispirati a esso. Zorzi prende parte al dibattito contro

[9] Le citazioni dal *Discorso preliminare* sono tratte dall'edizione a cura di Valgimigli e Muscetta (1953) e, d'ora in avanti, saranno riportate nel testo con il numero di pagina.

i classicisti razionalisti del secolo precedente, come Boileau, e degli illuministi, come Voltaire, e abbraccia con convinzione il connubio tra poesia e sacra scrittura, mostrando come caso esemplare il *Messias* di Klopstock[10].

In linea con le tesi di Zorzi e con la sua apertura nei confronti di autori stranieri, Monti motiva la presenza di nomi "forestieri" nel suo *Discorso preliminare* "acciò si veda che io non sono idolatra dei soli Italiani. [...] italiana o transalpina o cinese o araba che ella sia, fosse pur anche groenlandica, la poesia mi piace tutta, purché la trovi buona" (1003). Per poesia "buona" si intende la poesia davidica e quanti tra i moderni si ispirano più fedelmente a essa, proprio come nel caso degli autori di *Paradise Lost* e del *Messias*: "Ma Klopstock e Milton sono grandi, perché assistiti vengono dappertutto dall'entusiasmo di David" (1006). Il sublime di David ha qualcosa in più rispetto alle immagini di Omero, Pindaro e Virgilio perché scaturisce direttamente dall'energia vitale divina, come rivela con chiarezza il racconto della creazione:

> Dio, dice David, si affaccia sul caos, apre la bocca per crear l'universo, e l'universo si slancia da se medesimo dal fondo dell'abisso; il cielo si distende come un padiglione, e risplende seminato di stelle e di pianeti. Fa cenno al sole d'incamminarsi verso l'occaso, e il sole ubbidisce e prende il suo corso. Fa cenno al mare di ritirarsi, e il mare spaventato si mette in fuga e si rinserra mugghiando dentro i confini che l'onnipotenza gli prescrive. Dio manda un fiato di vita; ed ecco le campagne e le valli vestirsi di fiori e d'erbette, ecco frondeggiare le selve, e i ruscelletti spicciar fuori zampillando dal fianco delle montagne, etc. Fa d'uopo esser senz'anima per non restar commosso da tante e sì belle immagini, e non comprendere la superiorità che donano a David a confronto di Omero. (1006-7)

In questi versi che anticipano il trionfo della creazione nella *Bellezza dell'universo*, Monti celebra, insieme all'entusiasmo suscitato dalla parola di Dio attraverso Davide, la dimensione libera e immaginifica dell'*inventio* poetica. La "grandezza del genio" di Milton risiede proprio nel suo essersi ispirato alla sublimità della parola biblica e, in virtù della sua *vis* immaginativa, egli può essere incluso tra gli autori antichi:

[10] Proprio l'abate Zorzi suggerisce a Monti di tradurre l'opera di Klopstock, come racconta il giovane scrittore a Vannetti in una lettera datata "Roma, 8 luglio 1778" (Bertoldi 1929, 51-2).

> Mi sarebbe egli permesso di dire, che nessuno si rassomiglia ad Omero per la forza di fantasia, quanto Milton? So che molti non possono perdonare a questo poeta l'artiglieria dei diavoli contro gli angeli, le svelte montagne, e la furia colla quale da una parte e dall'altra le portano per aria e se le scagliano contro; il gran ponte fabbricato dal Peccato e dalla Morte, e l'allegoria pure del Peccato e della Morte, nella quale Milton simile si mostra a Spenser e all'Ariosto più che ad Omero e a Virgilio; e parecchie altre stravaganze. Ma questi difetti distruggono essi le innumerevoli bellezze di quel poema, nelle quali, sia detto con pace, egli supera tutti i poeti, ed uguaglia lo stesso Omero? Milton è difettoso; ma per cadere nei difetti di Milton bisogna essere un poeta di prima classe. (1005-6)

Secondo Monti, l'entusiasmo poetico miltoniano e, in particolare, quello espresso nel racconto della creazione dell'epica inglese è così vicino all'immaginazione biblica da superare le irregolarità stilistiche e ideologiche per cui la tradizione letteraria giudica il testo inadatto al genere o, ancor più, lo condanna come pericoloso. Le "stravaganze" cui si riferisce l'autore italiano sono tra i passi più stigmatizzati del *Paradise Lost*, a seguito delle critiche di Voltaire: il *Paradise of Fools*, la lotta angelica in paradiso e l'allegoria di *Sin* e *Death*. Ciò mostra l'alta consapevolezza critica di Monti riguardo il poema e, al contempo, il reiterarsi di un processo di selezione nella ricezione di Milton messo in atto già nelle riflessioni di Addison sullo stile sublime di *Paradise Lost*, che Monti conosce attraverso l'edizione del 1742 del *Paradiso perduto*, alla quale Rolli aggiunge la traduzione di alcune annotazioni sul poema tratte dallo *Spectator* (1711-12). Secondo Addison, *Paradise Lost* è un modello di poesia grandiosa tra i moderni, pur riconoscendo in questa grandiosità alcuni difetti. Ciononostante, non sono queste imperfezioni a sminuire il valore dell'opera miltoniana, precisa Addison sulla scorta del *Sublime* longiniano[11]: "M'è d'uopo ancora osservare con Longino che le produzzioni d'un gran ingegno con molti errori, e inavertezze sono infinitamente preferibili alle opre d'un Autore di grado inferiore scrupolosamente esatte e conformi a tutte le regole dello scriver corretto" (Rolli

[11] "Io so che le nature grandi oltremisura non sono per nulla pure. […] E forse anche questo potrebbe essere inevitabile, che le nature di bassa e mediocre condizione, proprio non osano rischiare in nessun modo né ambiscono ai massimi risultati, si mantengono per lo più senza errori e piuttosto al sicuro, mentre quelle grandi sono instabili per la loro stessa grandezza" (*Sul sublime* 33.2).

1742, 25). La difesa miltoniana nel *Discorso preliminare* di Monti ripete, quasi *verbatim*, il commento di Addison nella traduzione italiana di Rolli: "Longino ci fa intendere in tuono di serietà che le produzioni d'un grande ingegno con molti errori e inavvertenze sono infinitamente preferibili alle opere d'un autore d'inferior grado scrupolosamente esatte e conformi a tutte le regole dello scrivere corretto" (1003)[12]. La fortuna di Milton nel *Discorso* sembrerebbe, dunque, reiterare l'operazione di contenimento della potenziale esuberanza creativa dell'autore inglese, del quale si addomesticano e/o si eliminano i tratti più stravaganti: se, da una parte, l'autore inglese è innalzato a modello di sublimità per il canone letterario moderno, dall'altra, bisogna riconoscere che soltanto alcuni luoghi del poema possono definirsi sublimi più di altri.

3. Traduzione e tradizione del *Paradiso perduto*

La prima parte della *Bellezza dell'universo* rielabora in più luoghi il racconto della creazione miltoniana e, ancora più degno di nota, è il fatto che il testo utilizzato come modello poetico non è l'originale inglese, che l'autore non leggeva, ma la traduzione italiana a opera di Paolo Rolli. La versione del *Paradiso perduto* di Rolli, allievo di Gravina e intellettuale attivo tra Italia e Inghilterra nella prima metà del diciottesimo secolo, era stata la prima traduzione italiana dei primi sei libri del capolavoro miltoniano, apparsa prima a Londra nel 1729, poi a Verona nel 1730. La seconda edizione approntata nel 1742, quella probabilmente che Monti aveva a disposizione, era più completa poiché univa, al testo volgarizzato per intero, un corredo critico ed esegetico che includeva: la biografia di Milton, le *Osservazioni* di Rolli e la preziosa traduzione degli articoli di Addison riguardo il *Paradise Lost* nella rivista *The Spectator*. La censura cattolica aveva immediatamente condannato nel 1732 l'opera rolliana, che fu inserita nell'Indice dei libri proibiti nel 1758[13]. Malgrado il decreto condizionò la diffusione dell'opera miltoniana nel mercato

[12] A ulteriore prova dell'influenza di Addison, tramite la traduzione di Rolli, è il parallelo nel *Discorso* tra le stravaganze di Milton e quelle di Spenser (1006). Non essendoci traduzioni italiane o francesi di *The Faerie Queene*, Monti segue fedelmente il giudizio di Addison (*Spettatore sesto*): "Tali allegorie lo fan rassomigliar più a Spenser e all'Ariosto che ad Omero o Virgilio" (Rolli 1742, 26).

[13] Per un approfondimento sui rapporti tra Rolli e la censura del *Paradiso perduto* si rimanda agli studi di Costa 2006 e Brera 2013.

editoriale, sottolineandone la pericolosità, la traduzione di Rolli costituì l'unica fonte di conoscenza in Italia del poema inglese per tutto il Settecento fino al primo Ottocento (Rolli 2003, lxxii)[14]. In effetti, anche Monti si serve di questa unica traduzione disponibile, come riporta l'autore in una nota della *Bassvilliana* (1839, 85) e in un'altra al canto terzo della *Feroniade* (*ibid.*, 539). Del resto, sulla questione della corretta resa dei testi, Monti si esprime a favore dell'uso delle traduzioni. Già durante il periodo romano, mentre si cimenta nella volgarizzazione del *Messias* di Klopstock (con la mediazione dell'edizione parigina del 1769), scrive a Vannetti:

> Ogni lingua ha il suo entusiasmo e, quando un traduttore non è pago di trasportare nel suo idioma il sentimento del suo autore, e vestirlo dei colori che gli somministra la sua lingua, ma vuole di più lasciargli in dosso le stesse forme, il traduttore sarà sempre cattivo. […] se v'internerete nel pensiero di Klopstock, e lo sbarazzerete dell'involucro di una frase che in italiano mal suona, e in tedesco suonerà benissimo, se voi in somma v'appiglierete al midollo dell'immagine, lungi dal trovarla difettosa e stravagante, voi ci troverete dentro un certo patetico che vi riempie di piacere. (Bertoldi 1929, 118-9)

Un principio simile anima l'opera di traduzione dell'*Iliade* intrapresa da Monti. Sebbene le sue *Considerazioni sulla difficoltà di ben tradurre la protasi dell'Iliade* (1807) risalgano a una fase più avanzata della sua carriera, esse testimoniano la volontà di penetrare e trasmettere la potenza immaginifica del testo piuttosto che riportarne l'esattezza della lingua: "giudico sempre doversi accordare ad un traduttore la libertà di allontanarsi dal rigore del testo fuorché nelle idee fondamentali" (Monti 1953, 1038). Nel tentativo di superare l'annosa dicotomia tra la fedeltà alla lettera o allo spirito dell'originale, Monti aspira a una traduzione che giunga alla forza immaginativa del testo e ne restituisca l'entusiasmo. Per questa ragione, egli probabilmente apprezza, come molti suoi contemporanei, il *Paradiso perduto* di Rolli. Il testo rolliano non è semplicemente uno strumento indispensabile per conoscere l'opera di Milton. Monti, infatti, percepisce una profonda affinità con la pratica traduttiva di Rolli e ciò è possibile grazie al ricchissimo apparato critico ed esegetico che il traduttore aveva posto nella sua

[14] L'opera di Rolli venne ristampata con frequenza lungo tutto l'arco del Settecento, con l'accortezza di riportare come luogo di edizione Parigi.

opera. Il dettagliato saggio sulla *Vita di Giovanni Milton* e, soprattutto, le *Osservazioni* dell'autore stesso e le annotazioni di Addison, nell'edizione del 1742, costituivano "una sorta di breve trattato sul tradurre che attesta l'importanza dell'approccio critico di Rolli all'originale inglese" (Rolli 2008, 23). Convinto della incommensurabile grandiosità dell'opera inglese, Rolli cerca di essere più aderente possibile all'originale non per fedeltà alla lettera, ma per restituire il nocciolo essenziale della poesia miltoniana. Come spiega Laura Alcini, egli "mira piuttosto a un'interpretazione integrale del poema miltoniano tutt'altro che scontata nel panorama del coevo tradurre settecentesco" (2011, 329).

Sono principalmente due le motivazioni che spingono Rolli a intraprendere in forma decisiva la sua impresa traduttiva. Da una parte, i taglienti giudizi di Voltaire su Milton, a cui Rolli aveva risposto con la pubblicazione a Londra nel 1728 delle sue *Remarks upon M. Voltaire's Essay on the Epick Poetry of the European Nations*, poi tradotte in italiano (con il titolo di *Osservazioni Sopra il Libro del Signor Voltaire che Esamina l'Epica Poesia delle Nazioni Europee*) e inserite nelle due edizioni del 1730 e 1742. Nelle *Osservazioni*, Rolli si pone a difesa del valore poetico di Dante, Shakespeare, Tasso e Milton, rispondendo in maniera puntuale agli attacchi e alle rigide imposizioni di Voltaire sul genere della poesia epica, che il filosofo francese aveva ereditato dai fautori del movimento neoclassico – Joseph Scalinger, Jacques Le Bossu e Boileau. Il grande pensatore francese si era scagliato contro quelli che riteneva gli episodi più stravaganti del *Paradise Lost*, come la descrizione del *Pandemonium* o del *Paradise of Fools*, o ancora la guerra tra le schiere angeliche nel libro sesto. Con queste digressioni, secondo Voltaire, Milton aveva oltrepassato i limiti del soggetto epico, trasgredendo i parametri artistici della razionalità e della raffinatezza degli esempi classici. Rolli ribatte che se Milton avesse voluto porre dei confini al suo ingegno "pochi versi gli sariano bastati" per giungere al cuore della questione. Al contrario, "le maggiori bellezze" di questo poema consistono "nelle eccentriche linee più che nel centro" (Rolli 1742, 89):

> Di tutta quella immaginaria grand'opra il più sublime, ed il più meraviglioso è l'intera serie di quegl'immaginati oggetti che M. Voltaire appella ombre e vuol che siano intollerabili quando non sono allegorici. […] Per mio senno io penso che non vi

> fosse mai né possavi mai essere maggior estro Poetico di quella immaginazione della morte e del peccato, di quel viaggio di Satana, e della descrizzione del Caos. (*ibid.*, 92)

Dall'altra, la curiosità di Rolli per il *Paradise Lost* fu molto probabilmente scatenata dal peso che ebbe la figura di Joseph Addison e la lettura dei suoi articoli su Milton, apparsi su *The Spectator* tra il 1711 e il 1712 (Alcini 2005, 404-5). In linea con le riflessioni di Joseph Addison sulla sublimità del poema miltoniano, Rolli individua nella potenza creativa e immaginativa il carattere distintivo del poeta inglese: "La sublimità consiste nelle metaforiche frasi e nella grandezza della loro immaginazione" (1742, 73). Già nei *Remarks*, Rolli difende la profondità dell'ingegno miltoniano, senza il quale il poema non avrebbe potuto arricchirsi di rappresentazioni, luoghi ed espressioni sublimi:

> *Milton* had almost no other Help but that of his own Fancy" […] Now of all this imaginary great Performance, the most sublime, the most wonderful Part is the whole Chain of those imaginary Beings, which M.*V.* [Monsieur Voltaire] calls *Shadowy* and *Intollerable when they are not allegorical.* (1728, 69)

L'obiettivo principale dell'opera rolliana è quello di tradurre quanto più fedelmente la forza immaginifica e la poesia sublime di Milton. Da qui, l'assoluta modernità dello stile traduttivo di Rolli, il quale sostiene di "aver voluto essere Traduttor litterale", non nel senso di attenersi filologicamente alla lettera dell'originale, ma di saper tradurre la "Sublimità e poetica Bellezza" del poema miltoniano: nel suo intento di traduttore, afferma Rolli, "io pretendo d'aver non solo litteralmente tradotto i sensi di Milton, ma pur anche la Poesia" (1730, 157). Tuttavia, restare fedeli alle "sublimi originali bellezze" (Rolli 1742, 3v) non è affatto impresa semplice sia negli esiti linguistici e stilistici sia, soprattutto, per i contenuti controversi sul piano culturale e religioso. Da una parte, la ricerca della maestosità del linguaggio e del ritmo dell'originale provocano un effetto straniante che, paradossalmente, allontana la traduzione dal testo miltoniano (Borgogni 2015, 8). Dall'altra il sostanzioso apparato critico, come pure la dedica a due figure centrali in ambito religioso e letterario – il cardinale e segretario di Stato Vaticano, Andrea Ercole di Fleury, e il marchese Scipione Maffei – hanno lo scopo di giustificare l'opera di Rolli all'interno del sistema culturale italiano, fortemente sospettoso nei confronti dell'opera miltoniana (*ibid.*, 7-8). In altre

parole, Rolli dovette inevitabilmente scendere a compromessi con le coeve pressioni culturali, stilistiche e religiose, come osserva il commento di Ettore Allodoli sul *Paradiso perduto*:

> Questo breve lavoro onora altamente il Rolli ed è importante perché fa vedere come un italiano fu tra i primi a difendere il grande epico inglese: ma è anche quasi superfluo osservare che tale difesa è priva affatto di acume critico. E ciò dipende a mio vedere da questo; che il Rolli, ligio alle critiche razionalistico-classiche che fin dal rinascimento dominavano nel mondo letterario, difese con i mezzi e gli argomenti che queste teorie gli offrivano un'opera che violava appunto tali regole e tali domini. Il Rolli insomma compì un lavoro simile a quello dell'Addison. (1907, 97)[15]

Malgrado il giudizio negativo (e discutibile) sull'opera rolliana, Allodoli mette in evidenza un elemento essenziale nella traduzione e nella tradizione del sublime miltoniano, ossia la mediazione di Addison. Negli articoli dello *Spectator* dedicati all'immaginazione di *Paradise Lost*, Addison interpreta il sublime come una risposta alla grandezza non sul piano emotivo e delle passioni, ma sul piano della rappresentazione. Sono le rappresentazioni prodotte dall'immaginazione nel tentativo di conciliare i sensi e l'intelletto, tra la grandiosità delle cose e l'ordine formale, a generare il sublime. Per questa ragione, l'intensità delle passioni, sostiene Addison seguendo Longino, non è l'unica fonte del sublime. Ben più importante, è la facoltà dell'immaginazione che, in quanto potere di mediazione, connette la grandezza e la vastità con la forma razionale. È in questo eccedere le regole della misura che Addison contrappone il sublime al bello: il sublime rompe e amplia i confini dell'ordine della rappresentazione, ma non per questo spezza l'armonia del bello. Pertanto, non necessariamente il sublime provoca un effetto perturbante, bensì tramite il sublime si può raggiungere anche una calma solenne. Questa, in sostanza, è la differenza, per esempio, tra la rappresentazione della lotta angelica nel libro sesto di *Paradise Lost* e la creazione nel settimo: nel primo si rappresenta il sublime dirompente, mentre il secondo somiglia più a una tranquilla maestosità. Così scrive Addison nella traduzione di Rolli:

> Il libro settimo, nel quale entriamo adesso, è un esempio di quel sublime non misto e non elaborato di passioni. L'Autore apparisce in una sorta di maestà seriosa e

[15] In realtà, l'unico passo omesso per intero è quello del *Paradise of Fools* (3.474-97).

> tranquilla; e ancorché i sentimenti non ne diano un'emozione tanto grande, come quelli nel libro precedente, abbondano però d'immagini altrettanto magnifiche. Il libro sesto, come un Oceano turbato, rappresenta la grandezza in disordine, il settimo ha un'impressione nell'immaginativa simile all'Oceano in calma, ed occupa la mente del Lettore, senza produrvi cosa alcuna rassomigliante a tumulto o ad agitazione. (Rolli 1742, 49)

Se l'esegesi di Addison sul sublime miltoniano influenza la traduzione di Rolli verso un retaggio classicistico, questa lettura è tanto più significativa quando rivolta alla presenza del *Paradiso perduto* nella *Bellezza dell'universo*. Basti pensare che Monti esprime in maniera inequivocabile la sua ammirazione per Joseph Addison in relazione alla sua poetica del sublime, in una lettera a Francesco Torti del 1793: "Credo indispensabile, per iscrivere cose degne del tuo ingegno, che tu legga posatamente […] gli Spettatori dell'Addison sul Paradiso perduto. Ivi potrai bevere il fiore della vera critica" (Bertoldi 1929, 78). L'interpretazione del sublime miltoniano nel racconto della creazione di Monti si muove nella direzione di Addison, dove la forza dell'immaginazione connette la grandiosità delle immagini con il mondo delle forme e la misura della bellezza. La grandezza dell'immaginazione miltoniana si esprime nella forma di una calma maestosità e, di conseguenza, la creazione sublime di *Paradise Lost* si trasforma in una creazione della Bellezza, *La bellezza dell'universo* appunto.

4. La sublime bellezza nella creazione dell'universo

La bellezza dell'universo è un raffinato componimento in terza rima sulla grandezza della creazione divina del cosmo, che Monti recita in Arcadia il 19 agosto 1781 in occasione delle nozze tra il principe Luigi Braschi Onesti, nipote di papa Pio VI, e la contessa Costanza Falconieri. Il poemetto può essere suddiviso strutturalmente in due parti: la prima – circa centocinquanta versi – si occupa delle origini del mondo, mentre la seconda metà della creazione dell'uomo. Tra i diversi modelli che si riconoscono nella prima parte della cantica, in primo luogo c'è la fonte biblica, quindi, la tradizione esamerale (che da Basilio e Ambrogio giunge fino a Tasso e Du Bartas), come pure quella classica (Platone, Ovidio, Lucrezio) e, infine, il *Paradiso perduto* di Milton nella traduzione di Rolli è il testo più presente e, in alcuni momenti, persino parafrasato. La versione rolliana del

Paradiso perduto diviene l'ipotesto sia nell'appropriazione lessicale sia nell'*imitatio* di immagini e della loro disposizione all'interno della struttura poetica (Bertazzoli 2005).

Il testo di Milton appare, innanzitutto, nell'invocazione del poemetto e concorre alla costruzione del tema centrale: la Bellezza è il principio e la misura dell'ordine creaturale. Nella sua personificazione, la divina Bellezza sostituisce Urania, la musa celeste alla quale Milton chiede nel libro primo del *Paradiso perduto* di illuminargli la mente affinché possa dare inizio al suo racconto: "or tu rischiara / Quanto è di oscuro in me" (Rolli, 1.25-6)[16]. Sulla scorta di questo celebre verso miltoniano, Monti prega la sua musa divina affinché "nel mio petto / un raggio tramandar del tuo sembiante" (Monti, 7-8)[17]. Privo della guida della dea Bellezza, il poeta teme di perdere la giusta direzione, ricalcando la stessa preoccupazione miltoniana all'inizio del libro settimo:

vuoi tu, diva Bellezza, un risonante
udir inno di lode, e nel mio petto
un raggio tramandar del tuo sembiante?
Senza la luce tua l'egro intelletto
langue oscurato, e i miei pensier sen vanno
smarriti in faccia al nobile subbietto.
(Monti, 7-12)

Guidami or giù con sicurezza eguale,
[…] Affinché d'esto volator corsiero
Sfrenato (come già Bellerofonte
Benchè da clima inferior) gettato
Io non abbia a cader nel campo Alejo
Ad errarvi smarrito e in abbandono.
(Rolli, 7.19-25)

Dal testo miltoniano, Monti riprende soprattutto l'immagine della creazione come un processo di distinzione e ordinamento degli elementi. Laddove per Milton è il Figlio di Dio che, tracciando un cerchio nell'abisso, pone ordine e misura alla materia creata, nella poesia di Monti è la Bellezza che, sotto il comando divino, impone la forma alle cose:

Stavasi ancora la terrestre mole
del Caos sepolta nell'abisso informe,
e sepolti con lei la Luna e il Sole;
e tu del Sommo Facitor su l'orme
spazïando, con esso preparavi
di questo Mondo l'ordine e le forme.
(Monti, 16-21)

Ed in sua mano l'aureo compasso Ei prese
Ch'era già preparato nell'eterne
Provisjioni di Dio per circonscrivere
Quest'Universo, e ogni creata cosa:
Un piede Ei ne centrò; girar fè all'altro
La vasta intorno Profondezza oscura.
(Rolli, 7.276-81)

[16] Tutte le citazioni dal *Paradiso perduto* sono tratte dall'edizione critica a cura di Alcini (2008) e, d'ora in avanti, saranno riportate nel testo con il riferimento al libro, seguito dal numero dei versi.
[17] Tutte le citazioni dalla *Bellezza dell'universo* sono tratte dall'edizione a cura di Valgimigli e Muscetta (1953) e, d'ora in avanti, saranno riportate nel testo con il numero di versi.

Così come Urania agisce accanto alla sororale Sapienza nel testo originale ("Stavi già con l'Eterna *Sapienza*" Rolli, 7.12), secondo la lezione di *Proverbi* 8: 22-31, anche la Bellezza di Monti ha come sua ancilla la Sapienza creatrice. Insieme, eseguono il comando divino di creare nuovi mondi e, soprattutto, di ricondurre il caos delle tenebre, simile a un mare burrascoso, entro i confini dell'ordine naturale. La descrizione dell'abisso e quella della metafora del mare in tempesta rievocano il sublime miltoniano nell'infinità e grandiosità delle sue immagini. Nel *Paradiso perduto*, il caos sconquassa qualsiasi elemento e tenta di irrompere nel mondo creato, portando disarmonia, terrore e confusione, fino a quando il Logos divino riconduce la materia a una calma maestosa. Parimenti, Monti traduce l'oscurità e la vastità dell'abisso miltoniano, ma sostituisce alle parole del Verbo quelle della Bellezza che impone "silenzio e calma". Di nuovo, è attraverso la mediazione dello spirito ordinatore e creatore della Bellezza che Monti reinterpreta il sublime miltoniano:

V'era l'eterna Sapienza, e i gravi
suoi pensier ti venìa manifestando
stretta in santi d'amore nodi soavi
Teco scorrea per l'Infinito; e quando
dalle cupe del Nulla ombre ritrose
l'onnipossente creator comando
uscir fe' tutte le mondane cose,
e al guerreggiar degli elementi infesti
silenzio e calma inaspettata impose,
tu con essa alla grande opra scendesti,
e con possente man del furibondo
Caos le tenebre indietro respingesti,
che con muggito orribile e profondo
là del Creato su le rive estreme
s'odon le mura flagellar del Mondo;
simili a un mar che per burrasca freme,
e sdegnando il confine, le bollenti
onde solleva, e il lido assorbe e preme.
(Monti, 22-39)

Spalanca il Ciel le sempiterne Porte
Con sonora armonia su i cardini d'oro,
E fa varco al venir del Re di Gloria
In suo Verbo e in suo Spirito potente
Novi Mondi a crear. Sovra il Celeste
Confin stettero, e vider dalla sponda
Il vasto Abisso immisurabil, fosco,
Torbido, fier, deserto, inferocito
Qual **mar** ch'abbian dal fondo i furiosi
Venti sconvolto e gl'insorgenti flutti,
Quai gran montagne, ad assalir de' Cieli
L'altezza, ed a mischiar co 'l Centro il Polo.
Silenzio, onde turbate; e tu Profondo,
Calmati: disse allora il Verbo onnifico.
Date alla vostra alta discordia fine.
(Rolli, 7.253-81)

L'azione divina opera attraverso la potenza armonizzante della Bellezza, la quale agisce attivamente nella creazione naturale. Pertanto, la cantica di Monti prosegue rivolgendosi alla descrizione delle meraviglie nella volta del cielo, per sottolineare la vastità e grandezza della natura. La sequenza degli elementi è appena modificata rispetto al testo miltoniano (che racconta la creazione del sole,

delle stelle e della luna), impreziosita da espressioni tratte dalla traduzione rolliana (il predicato *seminare* rende letteralmente l'originale inglese *sow*):

Poi, ministra di luce e portenti,
del ciel volando pei deserti campi,
seminasti di stelle i firmamenti.
Tu coronasti di sereni lampi
al Sol la fronte; […]
Di tante faci alla silente e bruna
notte trapunse la tua mano il lembo,
e un don le festi della bianca Luna
(Monti, 40-51)

Sua grand'Opra in guardar; buona la scorse
Dio, perché il primo de' celesti Corpi
Ei formò il Sole, vasta Sfera, in pria
Senza lume, benchè Composto etereo.
Ei formò poscia la globosa Luna
ed ogni magnitudine di Stelle,
seminò il Ciel di folti Astri, qual campo
(Rolli, 7.432-7)

Analogamente alla creazione del cielo, anche quella del mondo vegetale e animale è ricca di prestiti miltoniani dalla versione di Rolli. La metafora della terra che genera le varie specie, nota sia al mito classico sia al testo biblico, è presente anche nel *Mondo creato* di Tasso (2006, 6.107-9) e nel *Paradiso perduto*. Monti, tuttavia, non si limita a riprendere le sue fonti, bensì, amplifica il senso del meraviglioso nel testo originario miltoniano e lo tramuta in una celebrazione della potenza creatrice e armoniosa di Dio sulla natura, "oh maraviglia!". Nella sequenza delle varie specie animali, Monti segue la disposizione miltoniana – prima il leone, poi la tigre, il leopardo e il cervo – e si serve più volte di prestiti lessicali, dalla traduzione di Rolli, per la caratterizzazione delle bestie.

La terra in sen l'accolse e la comprese,
e un dolce movimento, un brividìo
serpeggiar per le viscere s'intese;
onde un fremito diede, e concepìo;
e il suol, che tutto già s'ingrossa e figlia,
la brulicante superficie aprìo.
Dalle gravide glebe, oh maraviglia!
fuori allor si lanciò scherzante e presta
la vaga delle belve ampia famiglia.
Ecco dal suolo liberar la testa,
scuoter le giubbe, e tutto uscir d'un salto
il biondo imperator della foresta:
ecco **la tigre e il leopardo in alto**
spiccarsi fuora della rotta bica,
e fuggir nelle selve a salto a salto.
Vedi sotto la zolla, che l'implica,
divincolarsi il bue, che pigro e lento
isviluppa le gran membra a fatica.
Vedi pien di magnanimo ardimento

Della Creazion sorgeva il sesto
Ultimo Giorno; quando Iddio dì disse:
Or la Terra vivente Alma produca
In propria Specie, Rettili ed Armenti,
Terrestri Belve d'ogni sorta: e tosto
La Terra obbediente, aprendo il fertile
Suo grembo, espose fuori ad un sol parto
Creature viventi innumerabili
Perfette Forme in lor piena struttura.
[…] Ora l'erbose glebe
Figliano Armento, or fin al mezzo appare
Flavo leon che brancola per libere
Far le sue Retroparti; indi si lancia
Come sciolto da vincoli e, rampante,
Scuotendo va la rigogliosa giubba.
La Lonza, **il Leopardo e il Tigre in sorgere**
Gettan sopra se stessi, in monticelli,
Qual Talpa fa, lo stritolato suolo:
Et il rapido **Cervo** di sotterra

sovra i piedi balzar ritto il destriero, e nitrando sfidar nel corso il vento; indi **il cervo ramoso**, ed il leggiero daino fugace, e mille altri animanti, qual mansueto, e qual ritroso e fiero. (Monti, 85-99)	Alto leva la **sua ramosa fronte**. (Rolli, 7.575-85)
I **delfin snelli colle curve schiene** **uscir danzando**; e mezzo il mar copriro col vastissimo ventre orche e balene. (Monti, 124-6)	**I delfin curvi trescano** con le foche alla calma; (Rolli, 7.503-4)

Nella descrizione di Monti, non c'è traccia, tuttavia, né della "più vasta" di tutte le creature, Leviatano (Rolli, 7.508), né della "più grande Belva", Behemoth (Rolli, 7.587-8)[18]. Sembrerebbe che, di fronte alla sublimità miltoniana, Monti si limiti a riprendere quelle rappresentazioni naturali, sconfinate, grandiose ma, pur sempre, riconducibili alle forme ordinate della ragione e del gusto. Di certo il poeta non nega la presenza del non-bello o dell'orrido, tantomeno nella *Bellezza dell'universo*. A chiusura della prima parte della cantica, il sublime, finora rimasto nei margini della razionalità, irrompe con una serie di immagini terribili, incontrollabili e spaventose che minacciano l'agire ordinato della Bellezza:

> Ma che? Non son, non sono, alma Bellezza,
> il mar, le belve, le campagne, i fonti
> Il sol teatro della tua grandezza:
> anche sul dorso dei i petrosi monti
> Talor t'assidi maestosa, e rendi
> Belle dell'Alpi Le Nevose Fronti;
> Talor sul giogo abbrustolato ascendi
> del fumante Etna, e nell'orribil veste
> delle sue fiamme ti ravvolgi e splendi.
> Tu del nero aquilon su le funeste
> ale per l'aria alteramente vieni,
> e passeggi sul dorso alle tempeste:

[18] L'omissione del mostro Leviatano, di ascendenza biblica, è significativa non tanto per l'assenza del termine in sé che, in effetti, non compare in alcun repertorio o vocabolario prima di Monti; piuttosto, perché una delle prime occorrenze della parola si registra nella traduzione di Monti del poema satirico di Voltaire, *La pulcella d'Orléans* (1878, XVI 26,7): "[il Signore] comanda al basilisco, al leviatano".

ivi spesso d'orror gli occhi sereni
ti copri, e mille intorno al capo accenso
rugghiano i tuoni e strisciano i baleni.
Ma sotto il vel di tenebror sì denso
non ti scorge del vulgo il debil lume,
che si confonde nell'error del senso.
(Monti, 130-47)

Le influenze sono molte e abilmente mescolate, dallo spunto longiniano sull'Etna (*Sul sublime*, 35.4) all'elemento ossianico della tempesta, al richiamo testuale alla *Gerusalemme liberata* di Tasso ("sublime lampa in lucid'oro accensa" 1983, XI 14,4). L'assenza del sublime miltoniano nella lista di ingredienti che costituiscono "la bellezza nei fenomeni funesti e terribili della natura" (Bertoldi 1929, 166) lascia pensare a un intervento censorio di Monti nei confronti del poema inglese. Un intervento forse suggerito dalle forti critiche che Vannetti aveva rivolto al poeta riguardo questa sezione del poemetto. In risposta all'amico, Monti scriveva: "Vorrei solo che vi persuadesse che certe immagini che Voi chiamate settentrionali sono immagini italiane, eziandio, perché sono cavate dagli oggetti della natura, la quale parla istessamente agli occhi di Londra e di Parigi che a quelli di Roma" (*ibid.*). Ancor più, la scelta di eludere gli aspetti più irregolari della poesia di Milton sembra essere un esito naturale della versione utilizzata da Monti del *Paradiso perduto* di Rolli, fortemente influenzata dalle idee di Addison. E, in effetti, *La bellezza dell'universo* ci restituisce un'interpretazione del sublime miltoniano in direzione di Addison. Nelle annotazioni addisoniane tradotte da Rolli, la creazione di *Paradise lost* è un teatro di sublime bellezza, in cui le immagini di infinità e grandezza provocano nella mente del lettore un piacere di maestosa calma. Parimenti, *La bellezza dell'universo* associa la creazione miltoniana a una sublimità entro i limiti dell'azione armonizzante e ordinatrice della Bellezza.

5. Milton e l'Italia

La produzione del giovane Monti rappresenta un esempio articolato e singolare di trasposizione, traduzione e tradizione miltoniana nel panorama italiano del Settecento. Da un lato, la poetica e la poesia montiana testimoniano la fortuna di Milton e la sua reinterpretazione in chiave estetico-letteraria, malgrado il clima di

sospetto nei confronti del poema inglese, censurato dalla Chiesa e al centro di dispute letterarie. Dall'altro, il modo in cui Monti accoglie il *Paradiso perduto* nella *Bellezza dell'universo* produce un effetto straniante di addomesticamento verso la sublimità rivoluzionaria dell'originale inglese. Questa strategia non si deve unicamente alla sensibilità estetica montiana che celebra il trionfo del bello sul sublime, ma anche al processo di circolazione di *Paradise Lost* nel panorama europeo. L'operazione traduttiva di Rolli del poema miltoniano – fedele all'originale ma orientato alla mediazione – insieme alla traduzione delle note di Addison e alla biografia su Milton nell'edizione del 1742 hanno un ruolo fondamentale. La scelta montiana di privilegiare il bello sublime e di escludere gli elementi più radicali della visione miltoniana si inserisce, dunque, in un quadro più ampio di selettività interpretativa prevalente a quell'epoca. Sebbene, in definitiva, la tendenza italiana di epurare il sublime miltoniano sembrerebbe riprodursi nella poesia di Monti, il suo impegno letterario nei riguardi di Milton non si limita soltanto a ciò, bensì rivela uno scenario complesso sull'appropriazione poetica di *Paradise Lost* e della sua tradizione critica, che merita di essere ulteriormente approfondito.

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From Jewish-American Princess to the *Tikkun Olam*: the Case of Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical reevaluation of Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), challenging readings that reduce the novel to a celebration of cultural conventionalism and stereotypes. It argues instead that Wouk presents a complex portrayal of American Jewish identity in the 1930s – a decade marked by rising awareness of the Holocaust and its profound impact on Jewish self-perception. The novel captures the reawakening of a long-dormant communal consciousness, previously eclipsed by the forces of assimilation. Through the protagonist's journey from youthful rebellion to a thoughtful reconnection with her religious and cultural roots, Wouk explores the tension between modernity and tradition. This return is framed through *Tikkun Olam* – "repairing the world" – a central Jewish ethical principle grounded in personal responsibility and communal engagement.

KEYWORDS: Herman Wouk; *Marjorie Morningstar*; Jewish-American Princess; Jewish Mother; *Tikkun Olam*.

Published in 1955, Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* was the first novel on Jewish themes to gain popularity with a general audience in the United States. With over 190.000 copies sold, it "became the top grossing work of fiction of the year" (Prell 1999, 144) and went on to sell over 1.7 million copies in the next decade (Sicherman 2010, 193). The story even made it to Hollywood, with a popular film version, released in 1958, starring Natalie Wood and Gene Kelly. At the time of its appearance on the national literary scene, *Marjorie Morningstar* was amply reviewed both by the general press and by the Jewish one, with a reception that was mixed at best. It, in fact, ranged from *The London Spectator*'s enthusiastic description of Wouk's story as one of "almost Middlemarch length" showing "all of George Eliot's seriousness" (Gordan 2012) to *The New York Times*' harsh definition of it as a "565-page journey from mediocrity to mediocrity" (duBois 1955, 21). Interestingly, the novel caught the attention of such highbrow Jewish intellectuals as Leslie Fiedler (1966, 151-153) and Norman Podhoretz (1956, 186-188), who attacked Wouk for championing what they felt were an array of outmoded bourgeois values, especially in his representation of American Jewry. In that respect, Wouk's reputation intensified with the fanfare surrounding the book's publication, which earned him the *Time Magazine* cover picture. The accompanying anonymous cover story, in fact, established the author as the national "spokesman for conformity" (Shapiro 1996, 334) for his alleged rebellion against a cultural panorama "dominated by skeptical criticism, sexual emancipation, social protest, and psychoanalytic sermonizing" ("The Wouk Mutiny" 1955, 48-52). Subsequent scholarship on *Marjorie Morningstar* has been limited, with most studies reiterating familiar critiques of the novel's moralism and conventionality (Raphael 1984, 66). Only a few exceptions have recognized its "significance and contemporaneity […]" in portraying the distinctive struggles of "modern American Jews […] toward their own America" (Litvak 2002, 163).

This paper seeks to redress that imbalance by offering a more comprehensive and nuanced critical engagement with *Marjorie Morningstar*, aiming to do justice to its literary and cultural significance. It is, in fact, my contention that the author, a Bronx-born child of Jewish immigrant parents with a strong religious background (Beichman 2017, 15), had too keen a perception of the shared history and tradition behind him to limit himself to a sterile celebration of conventionalism such as the one ascribed to his novel. Indeed, in my view,

Marjorie Morningstar showcases the author's historical sensibility – a skill proven by his 1951 Pulitzer-winning World War II novel entitled *The Caine Mutiny* – by recapturing the spirit of New York Judaism during the 1930's.

At the time, with full-fledged immigration having ended in the 1920s (Hingham 1975, 43–58), a generation of foreign-born Jews had already put down roots in the New World, and a new U.S.-born generation was gaining momentum. These circumstances led American Jewry to choose the path of acculturation, by negotiating a newly secularized identity infused with the typically American values of material success and upward mobility. Yet, the Depression played a detrimental role in the process. As Beth Wenger aptly put it, in fact,

> when the Depression arrived, young Jewish men and women stood at a crossroads between the vibrant immigrant world of their parents and the search for a new American way of life forged against the backdrop of New York's urban landscape. Raised to believe in America as a land of opportunity and security, young Jews of the 1930s encountered instead a society of limited possibilities, growing anti-Semitism, and social and political turmoil. (1996, 9)

These dynamics often led to crises in the Gramscian sense: American Jews ended up feeling trapped in a cultural and spiritual "interregnum" (Gramsci 1971, 276), where the ancient values of tradition were necessarily being pushed to the background, while the "promise of Jewish life in America seemed more tenuous than ever" (Wenger 1996, 9). What dramatically influenced the course of their path in the United States was the outbreak of World War II – more precisely, the threat of annihilation posed by the Nazi's virulent antisemitism. As national consciousness of the Holocaust's horrors deepened, the event came to exert a profound influence on American Jewish identity formation. It catalyzed a resurgence of collective consciousness – a deeply rooted communal 'tribal' ethos that had been largely suppressed under the pressures of assimilation and the allure of American cultural integration (Trachtenberg 2023, 35–56). As Harold Ribalow aptly observed, "suddenly, these marginal Jews discovered that they were indeed Jewish, no matter how deviously they had previously argued against their Jewishness" (1957, 47).

This phenomenon is vividly illustrated in *Marjorie Morningstar*, a Bildungsroman in which the protagonist – a beautiful young woman in her prime

– embarks on a transformative existential journey, a path the author depicts with a keen eye, a touch of romance, and an exquisitely satirical hand. She moves from a youthful rejection of her Jewish heritage, often manifested through the behaviors associated with the so-called "Jewish-American Princess" stereotype, to a mature, reflective embrace of her religious and cultural roots. Her complex negotiation of identity, a process shared by many American Jews of the period, culminates in a thoughtful embrace of a deep sense of responsibility at the core of Jewish tradition.

This ideal is best captured by the concept of *Tikkun Olam* (Sherwin 43-58), Hebrew for "repairing the world" (Kahane 2012, 428), a Mishnaic notion which, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, took on renewed significance, particularly within American Jewish thought (Krasner 2013, 64). Confronted with the moral rupture of the Shoah, many Jewish thinkers reinterpreted *Tikkun Olam* not solely as a mystical or liturgical tenet, but as a comprehensive moral imperative. This post-Holocaust evolution of the concept emphasized a collective responsibility that extended beyond the Jewish community to encompass universal ethical engagement. As noted (Roskies 1999; Schacter 2009), the Shoah heightened Jewish commitment to social justice, interfaith cooperation, and atrocity prevention, rooting these efforts in a redemptive ethical tradition shaped by prophetic heritage and historical memory.

1. The origin of a stereotype: from the Jewish Mother to the Jewish-American Princess

In the 1950s, despite the presence on the U.S. literary scene of Jewish women writers the likes of Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen, who took a keen interest in representing the complexities of the female universe, both Jewish and gentile, the Jewish-American literary landscape was dominated by male authors, most notably by the then-newcomers Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, who examined the experience of their co-religionists in the United States from an overtly androcentric perspective. In this light, it comes as no surprise that the coeval representations of Jewish womanhood were largely based on elaborations, albeit high-profile artistic ones, of stereotypical literary figures: the Jewish mother and her daughters, the JAPs, an acronym for the aforementioned Jewish-

American princess.

The Jewish mother is descended from the *Yiddishe mama* of the *shtetl*, the much-loved "bread giver" celebrated in 1920s' literature for her unwavering, at times stoic, attachment to her family, an attitude that made her an unsurpassed model of abnegation. Unlike her progenitor, the Jewish mother is an "American phenomenon" (Reguer 1979, 41, qtd. in Dundes 1985, 457). She emerged in the post-World War I United States, a time when American Jews – having attained a degree of economic success through a combination of tenacity, initiative, and business acumen – began to leave behind the crowded, impoverished urban neighborhoods for more comfortable lives in suburban residential areas (Prell 1999, 142–143). This period also witnessed a profound cultural shift in American society, marked by the aftermath of the war and the ratification of women's suffrage in 1920. New attitudes toward femininity, independence, and public life began to take hold, reshaping both the perception and self-conception of women. These shifting gender norms also impacted Jewish life in America (Prell 1992, 347), most notably altering women's roles within the family. The traditional male breadwinner was gradually eclipsed by a new familial dynamic in which the woman assumed a more dominant position. The once-formidable Jewish patriarch gave way to a silent, if not entirely invisible, husband and father figure, whose primary role was reduced to ensuring his family's material comfort (Prell 1999, 143).

While the post-World War Jewish mother shares her forebear's attachment to her offspring, she lacks the *Yiddishe mama*'s idealism and strict observance of the Law. Being fully assimilated, the Jewish mother, in fact, sheds the Old-World moral values of her upbringing – among which are a supportive and communal ethos, the cult of education, and a disdain for the material dimension of existence – and grows into a voracious social climber who projects her own ambitions onto her progeny. A highly manipulative parent (Prell 1999, 143), not only does she teach her children the typical values of the American dream – with an emphasis on individualism and upward mobility – but she pressures them to achieve the economic well-being she never had. Yet, in contrast with her Yiddish predecessor, who focused her hopes on the firstborn son – whom she envisioned as a respected biblical scholar – she sets her "impossible expectations" (Prell 1999, 143) on her daughter. These dynamics give rise to the Jewish-American

princess, a materialistic, demanding and self-centered creature (Dundes 1985, 461), who expects the men in her life, first her father and then her husband, to cater to her every desire. As Julie Baumgold acutely observes: "A princess is made by only one thing and that is her mother. Her mother telling her that she is beautiful… that she is precious, the thing that the man has to earn and deserve (Baumgold 1971, qtd. in Dundes 1985, 461-462).

Before it rose to national fame in the 1950s (Baumgold 1971, in Baum et al 1976, 254), the JAP stereotype appeared, in embryonic form, in the fiction of Eastern European exiles. Take, for example, Anzia Yezierska's novel *Bread Givers*, published in 1925 (Bélinki 1992, 23-26), in which Sara Smolinski's stepmother shows some of the distinctive traits of the Jewish-American Princess. This phenomenon is evident in some passages of the novel in which the woman, recalling the golden days of her youth, paints a nostalgic portrait of an existence which she, herself, does not hesitate to call "princess-like". What she particularly regrets are the comforts to which her late first husband had accustomed her, including an expensive wardrobe and a host of servants "more courteous than some schoolteachers" (Yezierska 1925, 263). In this light, the new Mrs. Smolinski demands that Sara and her sisters take responsibility for supporting both her and their father, the elderly invalid Reb. Upon the daughters' sharp refusal, though, the stepmother vehemently complains, claiming what she believes to be a right acquired by marriage: "He told me that his daughters would put together enough money to keep him in comfort. And that is why I married" (Yezierska 1925, 264). For his part, Reb Smolinski, accustomed to the Old-World privileges of the *Porush* – the prestigious pious scholar supported by the women of his family and community – demands that his current spouse, like his late wife Shena, shoulder the burden of family livelihood and domestic work: "The vulture!" [...]. "What do you want from me? I should go to work! Should I bring her money?" [...] (Yezierska 1925, 266). The new wife, on the other hand, heedless of the common Jewish tradition, and in perfect harmony with the "progressive ideals" (Jillson 2004, 5) of upward mobility underlying the American Dream, explains that she married to "improve" herself: "Alas! All I ask of you is to be a man like other men. Pay the rent. Give me bread. Buy me a decent dress. That's why I got married" (Yezierska 1925, 267).

2. Marjorie Morningstar: From Jewish-American Princess to the Tikkun Olam

While Philip Roth is generally credited with perfecting the stereotypes of the Jewish Mother and the JAP in his 1959 collection *Goodbye Columbus*, and with masterfully deconstructing them, ten years later, in his ground-breaking book *Portnoy's Complaint*, the primacy of their introduction into post-World War II Jewish-American literature is to be ascribed to *Marjorie Morningstar*. The novel introduces a typical 1930's Jewish household in New York City, where a generation from the Old World and one born and raised in the new one dwelled under the same roof. The Morgensterns, Marjorie's parents, migrated to the U.S. in their teens and spent years toiling in the sweatshops to make ends meet. Following in the footsteps of many fellow immigrants, her father rose from the proletariat to an entrepreneurial position in the feather import business, while her mother, having internalized the then-current "middle-class notion of proper gendered behavior in a marriage" (Wenger 1996, 37) abandoned paid labor to be a homemaker. In that respect, their Americanization is complete, with only their accent giving their Old-World origin away.

Their firstborn, Marjorie, leads the carefree life of a 17-year-old Jewish-American princess, who enjoys the power of her blossoming youth and attractiveness, while dreaming of starring on Broadway with the stage name of Marjorie Morningstar. Like many of her peers in the 1930s, she attends college, but her reasons to acquire an education are not so much to build a career, as they are to increase her chances of upward social mobility through marriage. Unlike the previous generation of Jewish women, who had their nuptials arranged by their families, their descendants are, in fact, allowed to choose their husbands. Accordingly, while Marjorie desires romance, she is also acutely aware that her ideal partner must be a co-religionist capable of providing her with a life of middle-class comfort and affluence. Thus, when her first boyfriend, Wally Wronken – who genuinely loves her but lacks financial means – gives her a ring, Marjorie, though moved by the gesture, does not hesitate to express her aspirations for a more materially secure future. Cognizant of the need to attract the "right" kind of man, she devotes considerable attention to her appearance, frequently purchasing expensive clothing with little regard for the financial strain

this places on her father, who works long hours in a cramped, poorly ventilated office to support her lifestyle. In that respect, while Mr. Morgenstern often tries to persuade his daughter to moderate her desires by calling her attention to the harsh reality of the then-current economy, Mrs. Morgenstern is, instead, "the person who understands Marjorie best and who often functions as her best and most supportive friend" (Barack Fishman 1992, 248). Being endowed with some of the traits of the *Yiddishe mama* – above all wisdom, devotion, and overprotectiveness – and with the social-climbing ambitions of the Jewish Mother, Rose Morgenstern

> was carried away by her daughter's flowering beauty – the girl seemed to grow prettier every week in the sunshine of success – and by the mood of springtime, and by the parade of handsome well-dressed boys gathering in Marjorie's wake. Satiric though the mother's attitude was toward Marjorie, her daughter really rather dazzled her. At seventeen, Rose Kupperberg had been a Yiddish-speaking immigrant girl toiling in a dirty Brooklyn sweatshop, dressed in real rags. As she watched her daughter burst into bloom on Central Park West, her own lonely miserable adolescence came back to her, and by contrast it seemed to her that Marjorie was living the life of a fairy-tale princess. She envied her, and admired her, and was a bit afraid of her, and drew deep vicarious delight from her growing vogue. (Wouk 2020, 44)

For instance, when Marjorie gets an invitation to ride in Central Park with some friends – among which is one of her first love interests, Sandy Goldstone, a fine-looking young man who, to Mrs. Morgenstern's sheer delight, is also the heir to a retail empire – she does not hesitate to wear a brand-new fashionable horseback-riding outfit to impress him, even though, having had only three lessons, she is clearly not ready for such a challenge, let alone in an expensive attire. In this case, while Mr. Morgenstern objects to Marjorie's choice on both safety and economic grounds, Mrs. Morgenstern takes the opposing view. In the spirit of the Jewish Mother's mission she, in fact, keeps her eyes on the (proverbial) prize – i.e., the prospect of a handsome and rich husband for her daughter: "a girl needs clothes […]. Don't forget one thing. She gets the man she loves. She gets what she wants […]. That's the right way" (Wouk 2020, 14).

At the beginning of the novel, in May 1933, the family has just relocated from the Bronx to Central Park West, an upper-middle-class Jewish neighborhood which, at the time, was called the "gilded ghetto" (Wenger 1996, 94). Lulled by the siren voice of capitalism, Marjorie revels in the "sense of luxury" (Wouk 2020, 4) of her new home in a fashionable twin-towered apartment house significantly called "The Eldorado", one of the "finest Art-Deco structures in the city" (Ruttenbaum 1986, 118). From her perspective, the building, designed by architect Emery Roth, stands as a mark of her family's successful assimilation into the American way of life:

> Marjorie loved everything about the El Dorado, even the name. "El Dorado" was perfectly suited to an apartment building on Central Park West. It had a fine foreign sound to it. There were two categories of foreignness in Marjorie's outlook: high foreign, like French restaurants, British riding clothes, and the name El Dorado; and low foreign, like her parents. By moving to the El Dorado on Central Park West her parents had done much, Marjorie believed, to make up for their immigrant origin. She was grateful to them for this, and proud of them. (Wouk 2020, 4)

Though comfortably integrated into a middle-class American lifestyle, Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern have not forgotten their roots and, while not strictly observant, have raised their two children, Marjorie and Seth, to respect the main pillars of the Jewish tradition, such as major festivities and the basic precepts of *kashrut*. Yet, the secular pull of acculturation is very strong in Marjorie; as was then typical of the new generation of Jews born and raised in the United States, she, in fact, feels no sense of connectedness and belonging to the religious tradition, so much so that she never goes "to temple except to a dance" and "has forgotten any Hebrew she ever knew" (Wouk 2020, 12).

Particularly relevant to the scope of this article is Marjorie's apparent detachment from the plight of the global Jewish community – large segments of which, by the time the narrative unfolds, face imminent danger at the hands of the Nazis. Despite her evident awareness of the ongoing persecution of European Jewry – made explicit in the novel when she writes a school play that reimagines the biblical story of Jael and Sisera in the context of Nazi Germany (Wouk 2020, 47) –Marjorie exhibits a form of youthful self-absorption. Wouk intentionally critiques this attitude by satirizing her through two pointed misuses

of Nazi analogies, highlighting the disconnect between her personal concerns and the larger historical crisis. The first one concerns the quotas system for Jewish admission, then imposed by most elite private universities, which force Marjorie to attend classes at the local school, where there are no barriers to her enrollment. In her frustration, she describes Hunter college as "a concentration camp of... would-be co-eds forced by lack of money into the mold of subway grinds" (Wouk 2020, 56). The second one happens on a sneak excursion to South Wind, the adult summer entertainment camp where the protagonist hopes to learn the ropes of the theatrical craft. As she trespasses upon the property without permission, she feels "a little as though she were treading on a village green in Nazi Germany" (Wouk 2020, 113).

Despite being free spirited, adventuresome, and flirtatious with her many suitors, Marjorie retains the "Jewish idea of respectability" (Wouk 2013, 430), a moral code that, following tradition, prevents girls from engaging in premarital sexual activity. This rule of conduct will be severely put to the test upon meeting her first serious love, Noel Airman, a bohemian artist and a libertine who, as he jokingly warns Marjorie at the beginning of their relationship, goes around eating "little girls" (Wouk 2020, 226) like her. From his perception, in fact, Marjorie's moral values epitomize bourgeois respectability, what he satirically personifies as "Shirley":

> The respectable girl, the mother of the next generation, all tricked out to appear gay and girlish and carefree, but with a terrible threatening solid dullness jutting through, like the gray rocks under the spring grass in Central Park. Behind her, half the time, would loom her mother, die frightful giveaway, with the same face as Helen's or Susan's, only coarsened, wrinkled, fattened, with the deceiving bloom of girlhood all stripped away, showing naked the grim horrid respectable determined dullness, oh God… I affected Shirley the way whiskey hits an Indian. She knew I was bad for her, but I drove her crazy... Shirley doesn't play fair, you see. What she wants is what a woman should want, always has and always will – big diamond engagement ring, house in a good neighborhood, furniture, children, well-made clothes, furs – but she'll never say so. Because in our time those things are supposed to be stuffy and dull she'll tell you the hell with that domestic dullness, never for her… she's going to be somebody. Not just a wife. Perish the thought. She's Lady Brett Ashley, with witty devil-may care whimsy and shocking looseness all over the place. A dismal

> caricature, you understand, and nothing but talk. Shirley's a good girl, while Lady Brett was a very ready hand at taking her pants off. To simulate Lady Brett, however, as long as she's in fashion, Shirley talks free and necks on a rigidly graduated scale, which varies from Shirley to Shirley, but not such a hell of a lot. (Wouk 2020, 172-173)

According to Noel, "Shirley" embodies the archetype of the Jewish-American Princess – spoiled, controlling, and intent on dominating first her father and later her partner. She is portrayed as the inevitable precursor to the pretentious and domineering Jewish Mother. In this framing, Noel depicts "Shirley" not as an individual but as the embodiment of a transgenerational trajectory, suggesting that young Jewish girls are destined to replicate their mothers' traits: "Oh God, Marjorie, the dullness of the mothers! Smug self-righteousness mixed with climbing eagerness, and a district attorney's inquisitive suspicion" (Wouk 2020, 30). Through this perspective, Noel reduces the contemporary generation of Jewish-American women to a tired stereotype, effectively dismissing the notion that they might evolve into active, socially engaged citizens. Instead, he characterizes them as mere consumers, defined by appetite rather than agency.

Yet, by having someone like Noel as the spokesperson to the "Shirley" theory in the novel, Wouk seems to be committed to deconstructing it. The character, I argue, epitomizes the condition of many young Jews during the Great Depression, who were striving to put their origins behind them and, at the same time, looking to fill the void left by the renunciation to their tradition. These dynamics often led to a moral and cultural disorientation – what Gramsci, in his definition of crisis, aptly described as "morbid symptoms" (1971, 276) – a phenomenon which Wouk once again renders with finely tuned satire.

The firstborn of a wealthy and influential German-Jewish family, Noel has changed his real name, Saul, to the French term for "Christmas", a supreme sign of apostasy driven by the all too frequent phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred. Yet, the Americanization of his family name, Ehrmann, results in the involuntary English translation of the Yiddish and German neologism *Luftmensch*, the impractical idealist from the Yiddish tradition. An "Airman" in word and deed, Noel is a fickle would-be intellectual who moves from doctrine to doctrine, and

from theory to theory, time and time again. Among his many volte-faces, the most ridiculous happens when, after spending his whole adult life as an apostate, he is invited to a Seder at Marjorie's place. Against all expectations, the function – culminating in a tragicomic family brawl – not only fails to reinforce Noel's belief in secularism but instead provokes in him the irrational conviction that he might become a *Baal Teshuva*. He envisions himself enrolling in a theological seminary, studying intensively, mastering Hebrew, and, after "two years of the most fanatic work", achieving consecration as nothing less than "the biggest thing since Moses, and better" (Wouk 2020, 330). Yet this renewed infatuation with Judaism proves predictably short-lived. Noel continues to drift through life as a *Luftmensch* – a charming figure devoid of any substance.

Marjorie and Noel meet at South Wind, which she experiences as "a new clear world, a world where a grimy Bronx childhood and a fumbling Hunter adolescence were forgotten dreams, a world where she could at last find herself and be herself – clean, fresh, alone, untrammeled by parents […]" (Wouk 2020, 205). Within a few weeks of working together on a local theatrical production, charismatic Noel has Marjorie wrapped around his little finger and gets to keep her so for the better part of seven years. It is, in fact, he who first introduces her to the bohemian milieu of the Greenwich village, induces her to break Judaism's laws of *kashrut* by persuading her to eat ham – the last bastion of her religious observance – and eventually, much to her later regret, to violate her own values of sex conduct by sleeping with him out of wedlock. Their affair, a destabilizing seesaw of abandonment and returning, precipitates Marjorie's estrangement from her roots and restricts her horizon to only hoping that he, someday, will overcome his disdain for bourgeois life and eventually marry her, settle down with a real job, and move to suburbia to raise a family with her.

As Noel pursues success as a playwright, Marjorie works side by side with him, encouraging him to bring his first Broadway production to completion. When his show closes, after less than a week, following catastrophic reviews, he blames his own failure on her and proceeds to break up with her in a heinous farewell letter announcing his definitive departure for Paris. Broken-hearted but determined to win him back, Marjorie boards a ship to France to chase after him. As she crosses the Atlantic toward Europe in 1939, Marjorie encounters an enigmatic compatriot who will profoundly alter the course of her life. As their

friendship develops, Marjorie learns that the man, Michael Eden, a fellow Jew, is engaged in a covert mission to rescue as many Jews as possible from Germany before the Nazi regimes' genocide machinery is fully operational. With remarkable insight, he warns her, "Hitler is going into the skeleton-manufacturing business in a year or so... […] Jewish skeletons. Nothing can stop it. […], there is nothing in sight for them but to manure the German ground" (Wouk 2020, 511). The disclosure is an eye-opener for Marjorie, who eventually comes to realize that

> outside that limited world, outside her perpetual tug of war with Noel, outside her girlish dream of becoming Marjorie Morningstar, there was, there always had been, a roaring larger world in which men like Mike Eden moved; by chance, blindly pursuing Noel, she had stumbled into this larger world and it scared and excited her. (Wouk 2020, 499)

The sudden irruption of historical reality into Marjorie's coddled, princess-like life ultimately puts *Luftmensch* Noel in the right perspective, showing up the shallow insubstantiality of his philosophical theories. In this light, it is no wonder that, after reuniting with him in Paris, Marjorie rejects his long-awaited marriage proposal and leaves Europe a changed woman. Not long after her return to America, she, in fact, definitively renounces her ambitions to an artistic career and gets engaged to lawyer Milton Schwartz. The exact opposite of Noel both physically and psychologically, her fiancé upholds traditional Jewish values and inspires Marjorie to do the same. As she reconnects with her moral code of "Jewish respectability", though, she dreads telling him about her past affair with Noel. When she, reluctantly, reveals him the truth, she is relieved to learn that, despite his initial shock and grief, he is willing to take "her as she was" (Wouk 2020, 553).

Interestingly, on their wedding day, Marjorie views the ceremony from Noel's perspective, noting the "tawdry mockery of sacred things, a bourgeois riot of expense, with a special touch of vulgar Jewish sentimentality", to the point of eventually pronouncing herself a "Shirley, going to a Shirley fate, in a Shirley blaze of silly costly glory" (Wouk 2020, 556-557). Being an intelligent woman, Marjorie cannot but perceive the irony in the fact that her choice apparently

confirms the destiny that Noel had predicted for her. Yet, upon closer examination, the reality turns out to be different.

After the wedding, Marjorie and her new husband set up a strictly *kosher* home and move to a Jewish suburb in Mamaroneck, where she, following the birth of their two children, goes on to build a productive existence as a "regular synagogue goer, active in the Jewish organizations of the town" (Wouk 2020, 562-563). With the family being the heart and core of Israelite life, her choice is a far cry from being a "Shirley-like" unconditional celebration of bourgeois conventionality. Even though, as an adult, Marjorie is no longer the bubbly, confident, and rebellious Jewish-American Princess that used to charm her admirers, she is certainly much more than the "dull and boring…dull, dull as she can be, by any technical standards" woman that emerges from the entry in Wally Wronken's diary (dated fifteen years after Marjorie's wedding) which concludes the novel (Wouk 2020, 562).

3. Conclusions

The androcentric perspective epitomized by the male characters of Noel and Wally – who both pursued Marjorie but never got to marry her – disregards the full value of her contribution to the continuity of her people, a mission that becomes even more urgent in the wake of the Holocaust. Thanks to her choice, the communal roots of Judaism ultimately triumph as she, after her brief but dramatic brush with the dawning Holocaust in Europe, chooses responsibility towards millennia of Jewish history and tradition over the seductive lure of the American way of life. The path of orthodoxy, social activism and commitment that her life has taken, not only differs greatly from that of her own mother – who, though with the best intentions, focused exclusively on her family – but characterizes as a willful commitment to the preservation and transmission of the Jewish past in the American Diaspora, a purposeful recommitment to her heritage rooted in the ethical imperatives of *Tikkun Olam*.

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AIs, Androids, Machines, Sexbots: Questioning Humanity in Three Contemporary Narratives

ABSTRACT

The essay aims to offer a transversal and transdisciplinary map of some cultural products (presenting themselves as science fictions, dystopias, but also possible utopias), all released between 2018 and 2019, where the human is forced to confront the new technology of the 'machine' – such as Artificial Intelligence or androids. In them, the appearance of new forms of 'life', which demand to be recognised and progressively develop strong 'moral judgements', prompts a reflection on the redefinition of the community, the re-vision of the anthropocentric construction of the world, and the radical act of re-thinking the human and humanity in a more collective and sustainable way. Drawing on the theories of Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Fredric Jameson, the essay will analyse the film *Aniara*, directed by Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja, the exhibition *Training Humans*, held in Milan at Fondazione Prada, and, in particular, the novels *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan and *Frankissstein: A Love Story* by Jeanette Winterson.

KEYWORDS: Jeanette Winterson; Ian McEwan; Artificial Intelligence; Posthuman; Dystopia.

The Swedish film *Aniara* (2018), directed by Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lija and adapted from the 1956 Nobel laureate Harry Martinson' science fiction epic poem of the same name, is set aboard a colossal spaceship transporting thousands of people to Mars as they flee a planet Earth that has become uninhabitable due to a series of environmental catastrophes and calamities. The film appears as a post-apocalyptic science fiction – or a cli-fi – in which, following a minor accident that sends the spacecraft off course and out of the solar system, the passengers are faced with yet another disaster – arguably more insidious than those which have ravaged the Earth and forced the mass migration from it: the reconstruction of a community, or rather, the creation of a new one based on sustainability and collective engagement. In fact, while waiting for the technical damage to be repaired so that the ship can resume its course to Mars – a damage that ultimately proves to be irreparable –, they must find a way to support themselves, both physically and socially, using only the resources at their disposal. Above all, they must learn to cooperate and share as a means of resistance and coexistence. Such forced coexistence – depicted with biting irony as though aboard a cruise ship run by an incompetent, self-centred captain and crew – gradually reproduces the same social, class, and gender inequalities, as well as the identical issues of unequal access to food and waste disposal that originally caused Earth's devastation. Selfishness, lack of solidarity, inability to assist each other, and violence are precisely the disasters that the passengers have to face in this film[1].

Together with *Aniara*, this essay will examine the novels *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan and *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) by Jeanette Winterson. The choice of these case studies lies not merely in the proximity of their release but rather, in their shared concerns. Indeed, despite their differing

[1] It is interesting to note that the film, in some of its aspects, may recall or be associated with J.G. Ballard's novel *High Rise* (1973). The latter is set in a condominium which functions as a self-contained microcosm, an autonomous enclave resembling a miniature city almost independent from the external world and inhabited by two thousand residents, all members of the professional bourgeoisie. Once enclosed within this isolated environment, they rapidly reconstitute themselves by reproducing the traditional social division into three classes, as well as the same forms of economic injustice and inequalities. Above all, within this closed system a new type of community is free to develop, choosing violence as the primary source of cohesion and the dominant mode of interpersonal relation.

narrative structures and their specificities, all three texts engage with similar pressing questions, concerning in particular the future of humanity and of the 'human'.

In these works, environmental disasters, economic crises, and anticipated conflicts, as well as the appearance of new forms of life (or non-life) which demand to be recognised, prompt a reflection on the construction/re-construction of the community, a re-vision of what it means to be human, and the need to overcome the view of man as the measure for everything: a questioning of the sustainability of a future that is only and exclusively anthropocentric. Ideally, they all seem to answer Fredric Jameson's invitation to the radical, and perhaps impossible, effort to separate our[2] capacity of understanding from our anthropomorphic forms (and senses) of knowledge: to imagine a world and a system that are not uniquely governed and determined by anthropomorphic principles and parameters. Indeed, in *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson underlines that "even our wildest imaginings are all collages of experience, constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now: […] this means that our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production" (2005, xiii). Later, in the same text, he reiterates how "humans remain the prisoners of an anthropomorphic philosophical system" (111). The problem for him is:

> […] namely, whether we can really imagine anything that is not *prius in sensu*, that is not already, in other words, derived from sensory knowledge (and a sensory knowledge which is that of our own ordinary human body and world). (120)

From there, the invitation to find or look for "a new kind of perception", new organs of perception, "and thus ultimately a new kind of body" (111). For Jameson, utopia can help us in this operation (or adventure), as it "can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment" (xiii). And this is exactly the active participation that the three texts analysed in this essay, as science fictions, dystopias, or 'unlikely' utopias, demand of their readers and audience.

[2] The use of the first-person plural pronoun throughout this essay is intended to be both ironic and critically reflective, since the category of 'the human' is not an inclusive or neutral designation. Rather, it is constructed within rigid power structures and sustained by exclusionary norms. Far from being universally accessible, its boundaries make it almost impossible to be fully accessed.

Among the different aspects they address, these works wonder about the possibility of imagining an episteme that extends the very category of the human to those many subjectivities that were never granted complete access to it. In this sense, it might be affirmed that they follow the posthuman path theorised by Rosi Braidotti and the need, identified by Judith Butler in their study on precarious lives, to reformulate the 'frame' through which we recognise and apprehend (with the double, ambiguous meaning it carries of both to understand and to capture) what is life.

Braidotti opens her volume *The Posthuman* with the powerful statement:

> Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political, and scientific history. Not if by 'human' we mean that creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy […]. (2013, 1)

While in *Frames of War* Butler claims:

> […] specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense. [… T]he frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power. (2009, 1)[3]

Furthermore, these texts not only invite to expand the category of the human, but also to extend the categories – the characteristics and attributes – used to define what is human to a series of new 'bodies' that have never been associated with it, and therefore with life. In all of them, in fact, we witness the appearance – more or less explicit and under different forms – of another

[3] This brings Butler to the important distinction between 'living' and 'life': "[…] though it can be apprehended as 'living', [a figure] is not always recognized as a life. In fact, a living figure outside the norms of life not only becomes the problem to be managed by normativity, but seems to be that which normativity is bound to reproduce: it is living, but not a life" (2009, 8).

character, or rather of another presence that demands for a total reconsideration of the relationship between body and life, humanity and flesh, the natural and the manufactured: the presence of Artificial Intelligence and of the machine. Borrowing Simona Micali's words, these works "interrogate the status of a particular kind of artificial being, whose specificity lies precisely in its ambiguous positioning at the intersection of the categories of the *authentic*, the *copy*, and the *simulation*: the simulacrum that reproduces or hosts the consciousness of a real individual" (2022, 363; translation mine).

It is possible to add another lens (another 'frame') through which reading and entering these three texts. This time it is not a critical theory, but the exhibition *Training Humans*. Held between September 12 2019 and February 24 2020 at the Osservatorio of the Fondazione Prada in Milan, it was curated by the artist and geographer Trevor Paglen and Kate Crawford, a scholar and co-founder of the Research Institute *AI Now* at New York University.

The exhibition aimed to question the changes produced in the relationship between images, image-making technologies, and humans (and consequently the human), focusing not on how we see ourselves but on how we are seen, in particular by non-human 'eyes' and 'gazes' that nonetheless profoundly determine our lives and movements. The booklet produced for the occasion states: "Artificial Intelligence and computer vision now play a powerful role in how we see, and how we are seen" (Crawford and Paglen, 2019a). The 'training' of the title refers to the way Artificial Intelligence systems are taught (or fed) to know, interpret, and evaluate humans by analysing vast collections of images:

> […] vernacular photography is about images of the everyday, such as family events, ID photos, vacations, birthdays. Essentially a kind of accidental art by humans, for humans. Training images are often harvested from exactly these sources: people's photos scraped from the Internet, mugshots, selfies etc., but used purely for the purposes of machine identification and pattern recognition. The functional photography of the past is now training the systems of the future. (Crawford and Paglen 2019b, 2-3)

All the same, 'training' refers to the way we (as humans) are educated to recognise/not recognise and to be recognised/not recognised. Resorting once

again to Butler's terminology, our being recognised depends first of all on our being recognisable:

> If recognition characterizes an act or a practice or even a scene between subjects, then 'recognisability' characterises the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition […]. [The] categories, conventions, and norms that prepare or establish a subject for recognition, that induce a subject of this kind, precede, and make possible the act of recognition itself. In this sense, recognisability precedes recognition. (Butler 2009, 5)

The exhibition implies that, this time, we have to be recognisable not only to our fellow human beings, but especially to the machines: will it be (or is it already) the algorithms that determine our humanity? And, as affirmed in McEwan's *Machines Like Me* on which I will go back later, are the "factory settings" – but also the instruction manual – "a contemporary synonym for fate" (2019, 6-7) and destiny?

Training Humans addresses "the politics of seeing that are being freighted in with these new technologies" (Crawford and Paglen 2019b, 4). At the same time, it tackles the ways in which the 'new' machine is educated to classify us through the use of extremely 'old', fixed, and rigid categories[4] of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, ableism etc. that we thought we had overcome; but also to identify and detect our "emotional states and mental health" through the analysis of the images stored from social media:

> We start to see an explosion of online images that can be scraped, harvested, and used by computer vision researchers and corporations without asking for permission or consent from the people who took them, or the people in them. This proliferation of images is one of the reasons that machine learning became so much more efficient in the last decades. (10-11)

Another quote from the booklet might be important for the purpose of this essay: "Within computer vision and AI systems, *forms of measurement turn into moral judgements*" (Crawford and Paglen 2019a; emphasis mine). Indeed, the same machines and Artificial Intelligences which feature in the texts here analysed

[4] Crawford and Paglen define these categories as "disturbing" (2019b, 13).

gradually develop an utterly human capacity of moral and ethical judgement towards humans and (so-called) humanity.

The main character in the film *Aniara* works, in a very intimate and almost symbiotic relationship, with Mima, an Artificial Intelligence capable of accessing each individual's personal 'memory bank'. It has been created to favour the re-experiencing of the Earth as it once was, by retrieving reminiscences and visions of rivers, gardens, and forests: of the no longer existing nature. Uncertain about the chance to finally making it to Mars and anguished over their destiny, more and more passengers begin to turn to Mima. As the latter connects with an increasing number of minds and emotions, it progressively learns not only about the nature on the Earth but also and more importantly about the nature of the humans: the sufferings they have endured as well as the atrocities they have committed. Initially, Mima is no longer able to select and recreate merely positive memories and it starts to replay images of violence and catastrophes, triggering panic crisis in its users.

Later, overwhelmed by the passengers' suffering – and experiencing its own emerging pain – it[5] overloads and does not simply crash but self-destructs, enacting a deeply human act of suicide. In its final broadcast, Mima's last words are: "My conscience aches […] I've been troubled by their pains. *In the name of Things I want peace*. […] There is protection from nearly everything. […] *There is no protection from mankind*" (min. 42:37-43:26; emphasis mine).

Something similar happens in *Machines Like Me* by McEwan. Both uchronia and science fiction, the novel is set in an alternative England of the early 1980s, where Margaret Thatcher, having lost the Falklands War, is forced to resign from her role as prime minister – being (momentarily) replaced by her rival and 'hard left' exponent Tony Benn –, Brexit is already looming[6], John Lennon is not dead and the Beatles are reunited, and, even more importantly, Alan Turing is still alive. Recognised as a national war hero and "presiding genius of the digital age" (McEwan 2019, 2), Turing has carried out his research mainly in the field of

[5] At this point in the film, one might question whether the pronoun 'it' remains appropriate when referring to Mima, or whether it should be replaced with 'she' – an ethical consideration that also emerges prominently in both McEwan's and Winterson's novels.

[6] "Also, the government would set about withdrawing from what was now called the European Union" (McEwan 2019, 257).

Artificial Intelligence, also leading to the construction of synthetic and manufactured humans, labelled Adams and Eves, names "corny, everyone agreed, but commercial" (ibid.). The protagonist Charlie Friend, one of the first to 'buy' an Adam[7], begins to question the nature of these androids, their possible humanity and what makes them different from us. As Emanuela Piga Bruni points out, he confronts a web of contradictions:

> [...] in order to signal to Adam his determination not to treat him as a human being, Charlie tells him about the different stages that led to his acquisition, when he was unwrapped and power charged. [...] At the same time, however, Charlie feels the difficulty in finding a way to define the automaton, as the various expressions – artificial being, android, replicant – are all offensive to his presence. (2022, 136; translation mine)

Offensive expressions and, above all, utterly inadequate and inappropriate. Touching Adam's synthetic skin, Charlie states: "my reason said plastic or some such, but my touch responded to flesh" (McEwan 2019, 8). This opposition between 'reason' (Adam is a machine) and experience (still, Adam is something more) leads him to partly refuse to consider and accept the android as something more than a technologically advanced lively object; nonetheless, the words that he has to describe 'it' are only anthropomorphic terms which paradoxically turn Adam into life. As an example, throughout the novel the android is defined by the protagonist "as a real person, with the layered intricacies of his personality revealed only through time, through events, through his dealings with whomever he met" (22); as endowed with "an operating system, as well as a nature – that is, a human nature – and a personality" (24); suggesting an ability to really feel or to have sensations (255); or even as thoughtful and looking "sad sometimes" (234).

After all these speculations, Charlie seemingly arrives to the conclusion that "the moment we couldn't tell the difference in behaviour between machine and person was when we must confer humanity on the machine" (84)[8]; and later that "[p]erhaps biology gave [him] no special status at all, and it meant little to say

[7] Charlie defines Adam as "the ultimate plaything, the dream of ages, the triumph of humanism – or its angel of death" (4).

[8] In particular, here he is making reference to what the fictional Turing had written in his early works.

that the figure standing before [him] wasn't fully alive" (129 – a conclusion similar to the one that can be found in Winterson's novel too).

Yet, it is important to emphasise how, in a kind of reversal of the mirror, the same act of questioning is carried out by the androids themselves, who painfully and with difficulty try to understand what they are and what they should be, but especially what the humans that surround them are and how they are supposed to function. In the novel, if the artificial mind is programmed to solve (our) problems, it is however "not so well defended" (180) from inhumanity – like our mind instead. Paradoxically, although the androids have access to all knowledge via vast databases, they are not equipped to understand our ethical nuances, our deviations, our cruelties and injustices, our excuses and lies[9]. *Machines Like Me* appears as an intense and profound consideration on values and morality, on ethics and judgement; but also as an invitation to rethink the human being both in his/her singularity and in his/her collective function as a social being, as well as to re-imagine what life is and what intelligence and cognition truly are.

In their struggle to recognise the essence of the humans, in their attempt to look into our hearts and minds and to understand how to live with us, these Adams and Eves begin to fail at coping with and to endure this task. As their software, or mind and consciousness learn about humanity, they realise to be unprepared, with no defence devices, while a profound sadness seems to seize them. In relation to this, Piga Bruni talks about "the feeling of *being cast out* into the world, in a condition of loneliness and bewilderment" (2022, 144; translation mine); while according to the words pronounced in the novel by Turing:

> […] the A-and-Es were ill equipped to understand human decision-making, the way our principles are warped in the force field of our emotions, our peculiar biases, our self-delusion and all the other well-charted defects of our cognition. Soon, these Adams and Eves were in despair. They couldn't understand us, because we couldn't understand ourselves. Their learning programs couldn't accommodate us. If we didn't know our own minds, how could we design theirs and expect them to be happy alongside us? (McEwan 2019, 299)

[9] Not by chance, the novel opens with a quotation from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Secret of the Machines": "But remember, please, the Law by which we live,/We are not built to comprehend a lie…" (no page).

Not surprisingly, just like Mima in *Aniara*, they become once again overloaded and begin 'to destroy' themselves, not through "physical methods, like jumping out of a high window. They went through the software, using roughly similar routes. They quietly ruined themselves. Beyond repair"; or they compromise their cognitive systems by making themselves "profoundly stupid [… able to] carry out simple commands but with no self-awareness". An act which is defined as a "*failed suicide*. Or a successful disengagement" (175; emphasis mine).

However, a different destiny is the one awaiting Adam, because he develops a compelling reason to remain alive: the love that he feels for Charlie's partner, Miranda. The 'Charlie's Adam' does not commit suicide; instead he is 'killed' by his own 'owner'. When Adam decides – driven by his own pure sense of justice even if in contrast with the feelings he has for the woman – to act in a way that will endanger Miranda, Charlie strikes him with a hammer, thinking: "I bought him and he was mine to destroy" (278). What is the proper definition for this action? Is it possible to murder a machine? And what or who is Charlie destroying? If the latter affirms "It wasn't a murder, this wasn't a corpse" (293), Turing, to whom Charlie takes the inanimate body of Adam, states:

> My hope is that one day, what you did to Adam with a hammer will constitute a serious crime. Was it because you paid for him? Was that your entitlement? […] You weren't simply smashing up your own toy, like a spoiled child. […] You tried to destroy a life. He was sentient. He had a self. How it's produced, […] it doesn't matter. Do you think we're alone with our special gift? Ask any dog owner. (303-04)

In the last paragraph I used the problematic expression 'Charlie's Adam', which echoes Charlie's already mentioned ongoing struggle in defining Adam's nature and presence. In the novel, it is once again Turing who questions whether 'owners' is the right term to describe those who 'possess' an android (174).

A similar question is addressed in Jeanette Winterson's novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. An astonishing, portentous, monstrous re-adaptation of the figures revolving around the creation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as well as an high-

tech rewriting of the latter[10], Winterson's *Frankisssstein* moves between the nostalgic and the optimistic; between the queer, transgender, posthuman, and transhuman; between science fiction and, if not directly utopia, at least a certain utopian and enthusiastic perspective towards the possibilities awaiting us, to be faced with openness and an attitude of wonder, with awareness but not with fear – the subtitle suggests that, in the end, what is offered is 'a love story'. Like McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, the novel explores the responsibility of creation – of creating, of giving birth, of giving life, and of accepting that that life can develop independently and autonomously without our control; but it is also about the right to personal identity; the right to create our self: to self-fashioning as self-affirmation.

Through a chain of events that are apparently impossible and, in certain cases, absurdly real, and through almost spectral and monstrous creatures such as the Artificial Intelligence, the sexbot, and the transgender body of the protagonist, the doctor Ry Shelley (a contemporary re-version of Mary Shelley), *Frankisssstein*, too, invites us to a radical re-vision of what is recognised/able as human and, consequently, to a consideration on the need to re-construct our sense of community by expanding and opening it to those non-human agents who share our destiny.

The novel seems written with in mind the feminist figurations of the cyborg by Donna Haraway and of the nomadic subject by Rosi Braidotti, investigating issues related to the construction of gender, the compulsory binarism, the materiality and the ownership of the body, and what defines our being human, our being alive, and, thus, a life (body or mind, brain or mind, body or soul); as well as the question of our sustainability – of the sustainability of the human.

Frankisssstein mixes and remixes imagination, romanticism and hard science, also becoming a reflection on how new the technology of Artificial Intelligence is and how natural the previous intelligence was: how the artificial brain of Artificial Intelligence operates differently from our natural brain and how algorithms have always been the determining companions in human life. To

[10] The novel develops around two historical moments and two narratives (merging and 'fusing' together): one set during the years in which Mary Shelley conceived her work and the other in our (apparently) futuristic present.

clarify this last statement, it is possible to quote a very general definition of algorithm:

> An algorithm is a sequence of unambiguous instructions for solving a problem, i.e., for obtaining a required output for any legitimate input in a finite amount of time. […] The reference to 'instructions' in the definition implies that there is something or someone capable of understanding and following the instructions given. We call this a 'computer', keeping in mind that before the electronic computer was invented, the word 'computer' meant a human being involved in performing numeric calculations. Nowadays, […] although the majority of algorithms are indeed intended for eventual computer implementation, the notion of algorithm does not depend on such an assumption. (Levitin 2012 [2003], 3)

Taking into account that algorithms have usually to be finite (consisting of a delimited number of 'instructions'), deterministic (the same input has to produce the same output), unambiguous (they must be interpreted in the same way), and as general as possible (generating possible solutions for for "solving the same problem"; ibid.), all this makes them quite similar to the behavioural and social norms imposed to guide human attitudes, habits, and practices.

I would like to associate this vision of algorithms not as something entirely 'new', with an idea that Braidotti articulates in her essay "Organs without Bodies":

> [...] what we are going through in the postmodern technological scene, is not a 'scientific' revolution but rather an ideological one, a fundamental change in our modes of representation of life. There is clearly a shift in the scale of the techniques involved in contemporary biopower, but not in the scientific logic that sustains them. (1994, 44)

A similar consideration may be found in Winterson's essay "Love(Lace) Actually", part of *12 Bytes*, a collection of writings conceived as a kind of companion piece to *Frankissstein*. In particular, the essay is dedicated to two women, Mary Shelly and Ada Lovelace – (not always) remembered as the first computer programmer –, both appearing as characters in the novel. According to the author, the two figures stand "[a]t the beginning of the future":

> History repeats itself – the same struggles in different disguises – but AI is new to human history. In different ways the young women saw it coming. […]

> Both Mary and Ada intuited that the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution would lead to more than the development of machine technology. They recognised a decisive shift in the fundamental framing of what it means to be human.
> Victor Frankenstein: 'If I could bestow animation upon life-less matter…'
> Ada: 'An explicit function… worked out by the engine… without having been worked out by human heads and human hands first'. (Winterson 2021b, 8-9)

As previously argued, *Frankissstein* mixes imagination and hard science to pose a series of provocative questions such as: is the ethics of Artificial Intelligence more human than the ethics of the human? And, similarly to McEwan's novel, if the future is in the 'hands' of that Artificial Intelligence, what will happen when the homo sapiens is no longer the 'smartest' thing on earth? In *Machines Like Me*, Adam suddenly manifests, as a kind of warning if not directly a menace, this following 'moral judgment': "From a certain point of view, the only solution to suffering would be the complete extinction of humankind" (McEwan 2019, 67). The warning stems from the fact that if the humans want to create an Artificial Intelligence capable of envisioning a better future for both them and the planet, they must be aware and prepared to accept that this does not automatically guarantee a future that is human: that the human, as it is now, is sustainable and the best possible choice for the planet – as well as for all the other 'creatures' inhabiting and living it. While in Winterson's text we read: "artificial intelligence is not sentimental – it is biased towards best possible outcomes. The human race is not a best possible outcome" (2019, 74).

Yet, *Frankissstein* seems to keep a positive attitude, by showing that one of the answers to this problematic future might be found in hybridity: the novel is hybrid, mixing two stories and two historical times; the characters are hybrid in their being simultaneously new and coming from another novel – already constructed by another author and other fictions; their bodies are hybrid, not only in their merging nature and culture, but also in their being simultaneously public and private; and the human is here hybrid in being never self-sufficient, but always in connections and relations with other humans and non-human creatures. Haraway had already prefigured all this, both imaginatively with her cyborg as a figure of potent fusion, and in a more 'scientific' way in *When Species Meet*:

> I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 % of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 % of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such […]. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. (2007, 3-4)

But, clearly, in the novel the human is hybrid also in its fusing together with the artificial, the manufactured, the information technology, and in being already a machine. Victor Stein, the re-incarnation of Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein as a transhumanist scientist in the field of Artificial Intelligence[11], defines it as 'data-processing biology', a sort of biological computer not so remarkable when compared to animals and plants. As he puts it:

> An algorithm is a series of steps for solving a recurring problem. A problem isn't a bad thing – it's more of a How Do I? A problem might be – my route to work every morning; it might be, I am a tree – so how do I transpire? So an algorithm is a data-processing plant. Frogs, potatoes, humans can be understood as biological data-processing plants – if you believe the biologists. Computers are non-biological data-processing plants.
> If data is the input and the rest is processing, then humans aren't so special after all. (Winterson 2019, 78)

'Blurred' and 'dissolved', being both among the first terms appearing in the novel, might be the key words to approach it and the (not so fictional) world it presents[12]: blurring and dissolution of boundaries, breaking binarism, merging

[11] Many critics have seen in Winterson's Victor Stein a fusion of both Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein and Percy Bysshe Shelley. See for ex. Fausto Ciompi: "Like Percy, Stein is in love with a Shelley, the transsexual Ry, whose name, short for Ryan, obviously recalls Mary. Like both his counterparts, Stein […] defies God's and nature's laws by envisioning a life beyond biological life" (2022, 168-69).

[12] The beginning of the novel plunges the readers in a reality where water and mist have made things lose their usual definition:
"Lake Geneva, 1816.
Reality is water-soluble.
What we could see, the rocks, the shore, the trees, the boats on the lake, had lost their usual definition and *blurred* into the long grey of a week's rain. Even the house, that we fancied was made of stone, wavered inside a heavy mist and through that mist, sometimes, a door or a window appeared like an image in a dream.
Every solid thing had *dissolved* into its watery equivalent" (Winterson 2019, 1; emphasis mine).

genders and genres, but also past, present, and future, fiction and reality, physical and non-physical, life and death. All these fusions are (apparently) embodied by the transgender protagonist Ry[13], who describes themselves as:

> […] liminal, cusping, in between, emerging, undecided, transitional, experimental, a start-up (or is it an upstart?) in my own life. (29)
> When I look in the mirror I see someone I recognise, or rather, I see at least two people I recognise. This is why I have chosen not to have lower surgery. I am what I am, but what I am is not one thing, not one gender. I live with doubleness. (89)
> I am in the body that I prefer. But the past, my past, isn't subject to surgery. I didn't do it to distance myself from myself. I did it to get nearer to myself. (122)

Refusing the surgery that would realign them to the recognised and accepted binary paradigm does not result in a fragmented body. Ry aligns their physical reality with the mental impression of their multiple selves[14] and, thus, becomes an assemblage – once again blurring pieces, parts, organs, sexualities, stories, histories, and bits (as the elemental units of information a computer can process). Like Haraway's cyborg, Ry might appear as a figure of potent fusions and connections; a connectivity, as tranversal and transpecies interrelationships and mutual help towards a collective and responsible sustainability, that is proposed by Winterson also in the preface to her *12 Bytes*:

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[13] I used the word apparently because it is important to underline the fact that Winterson has also been criticised for her representation of Ry as a transgender subject. The character undergoes throughout the novel an array of physical, psychological, and linguistic transphobic violence which are not always properly dealt with: in certain occasions, they are named but not completely addressed. Some reviewers, thus, have read Ry as passive and lacking agency – see for ex. Sam Byers review of the novel for *The Guardian*: "Ry may have taken control of their own body, adapted it in line with their sense of self, but they are discernibly excluded from the wider work of redesigning humanity – a poignant paradox when one considers Ry's personal insight into bodies in flux" (2019). Furthermore, a form of violence seems to be implicit in their 'love story' with Victor Stein, who sees them more as a transhuman experiment than a human being: "And you, Ry, gorgeous boy/girl, whatever you are, you had a sex change. You chose to intervene in your own evolution. You accelerated your portfolio of possibilities. That attracts me. How could it not? You are both exotic and real. The here and now, and a harbinger of the future" (Winterson 2019, 154). Some critics have also accused Winterson of reproducing transphobic attitudes (see Horvat 2021; John 2024).

[14] To paraphrase Victor Stein's words (see 188).

> Humans love separations – we like to separate ourselves from other humans, usually in hierarchies, and we separate ourselves from the rest of biology by believing in our superiority. […] *Connectivity* is what the computing revolution has offered us – and if we could get it right, we could end the delusion of separate silos of value and existence. We might end our anxiety about intelligence. Human or machine, we need all the intelligence we can get to wrestle the future out of its pact with death – whether war, or climate breakdown, or probably both. Let's not call it artificial intelligence. Perhaps alternative intelligence is more accurate. And we need alternatives. (2021a, 5; emphasis mine)[15]

The transhumanist Victor Stein, instead, proposes another utopian/dystopian solution (or alternative, to evoke the last quotation) to the revolutionary process of re-vision the human is undergoing, envisioning a becoming digital: "to upload [the] self, upload [the] consciousness, to a substrate not made of meat" (Winterson 2019, 110); discarding the body to transform one's self not into brain, but into a database, and thus in this way becoming immortal. A solution which might be regarded as either dystopian or utopian, but surely not far from the reality of our transhumanist science. By mentioning Hans Moravec's theories, Eugene Thacker highlights how the idea of mind uploading emerged as early as at the end of the 1980s, as a concept "in which the parallels between neural pattern activity in the human mind and the capacity of advanced neural networking computing will enable humans to transfer their minds into more durable (read: immortal) hardware system" (2003, 74)[16].

According to Victor Stein, becoming digital means to free oneself from the physical form, transcending the fragile body – a body in particular that is still too 'gendered' and therefore victim of discriminations –, while at the same time remaining radically human. In this way, through her provocative and problematic

[15] Interestingly, this idea of connectivity is also at the centre of a kind of utopia envisioned and dreamt by Adam in *Machines Like Me*: "When the marriage to men and women to machine is complete […] we'll understand each other too well. We'll inhabit a community of minds to which we have immediate access. *Connectivity* will be such that individual nodes of the subjective will merge into an ocean of thought, of which our Internet is the crude precursor. As we come to inhabit each other's minds, we'll be incapable of deceit. Our narratives will no longer record endless misunderstanding" (McEwan 2019: 149; emphasis mine); even more interestingly, however in the following page of the novel the utopia of the android is redefined as a nightmare by the human Charlie: "Adam's utopia masked a nightmare, as utopia usually do […]" (151).

[16] For the idea of mind uploading see also Prisco (2013).

characters, Winterson prompts readers also to reflect deeply on love and affection: through which physical, emotional, or electronic circuits does love flow? Or rather, is love generated by the body or the mind[17]? What role does touch, reciprocal touch play? Which bodies are recognisable as normatively human and is it possible to recognise a non-body as a life form and, hence, falling in love with it? Once again, what makes us human and, above all, why choose to remain exclusively and permanently human? In a dialogue between Ry and Victor Stein it is stated:

> Think what it will be like, he says, when non-biological life forms, without hearts, seek to win ours.
> Will they?
> I believe so, said Victor. All life forms are capable of attachment.
> Based on what?
> Not reproduction. Not economic necessity. Not scarcity. Not patriarchy. Not gender. Not fear. It could be wonderful!
> Are you saying that non-biological life forms might get closer to love – in its purest form – than we can? […]
> All I'm saying is that love is not exclusively human – the higher animals demonstrate it – and more crucially we are instructed that God is love. Allah is love. God and Allah are not human. Love as the highest value is not an anthropomorphic principle. (Winterson 2019, 159-160)

Nonetheless, the novel makes the readers wonder whether technological advancement truly offers an opportunity to overcome women, gender, and racial discriminations, or if whether, being far from neutral and deeply enwtined with political and capitalistic systems, it simply reproduces the same forms of oppression – as Crawford and Paglen also clearly show in and with their previously described exhibition *Training Humans*.

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[17] The character Mary Shelly, talking to her Percy Bysshe Shelley, claims:
"How would I love you, my lovely boy, if you had no body?
Is it my body that you love?
And how can I say to him that I sit watching him while he sleeps, while his mind is quiet and his lips silent, and that I kiss him for the body I love?
I cannot divide you, I said" (15).

If Victor Stein believes that Artificial Intelligence can generate a world without "labels – and that includes binaries like male and female, black and white, rich and poor" (79), during a TED talk in which he expresses his ideas/dreams, he is faced by a woman from the audience rebutting:

> […] the race to create what you call true artificial intelligence is a race run by autistic-spectrum white boys with poor emotional intelligence and frat-dorm social skills. In what way will their brave new world be gender neutral – or anything neutral? […] We know already that machine learning is deeply sexist in outcomes. Amazon had to stop using machines to sift through job applications CVs because the machines chose men over women time after time. There is nothing neutral about AI. (76)

Not by chance, another specific category of automatons appears in the text: sexbots. They become a tool to interrogate the stereotypes, sexism, and gender violence that continue to characterise the world of new technologies (and the world of their users)[18].

At the same time, however, Winterson controversially invites her readers to consider them from a radically different perspective. The presumptuous, chauvinistic 'creator' of these sexbots Ron Lord (re-version of Lord Byron in the contemporary narrative) states: "What we offer is fantasy life, not real life" (46) – a sentence that can be read in an ambiguous way. What is this 'fantasy life'? What does make people choose the sexbot, the machine, rather than the human being? According to the same businessman: "anymore crap relationships with crap humans" (312). The author prompts us precisely to rethink this choice as the fear of engaging with other humans, of being abandoned and betrayed, of not being able to achieve the required standards – whereas apparently the machine could never let us down. Sexbots, then, can become companions. Ron Lord's previous remark continues: "And how do you know it will be one-way [relationships]? Bots will learn. That's what machine learning means" (ibid.).

At this point a beautiful and sad story is introduced, another 'love story' – recalling the novel's subtitle – between a human 'owner' and the sexbot Eliza. The man, having "for the first time in his life […] not feared rejection or failure" (ibid.), finds love in her. He starts sharing his emotions and the things he likes to

[18] For a feminist critique to sex robots, see Richardson and Odlind (2022).

do with her. She listens and listens... She can speak (being equipped with a program that allows to repeat words), but she has no autonomous experience, so she learns his memories. The man grows old and dies, while the immortal Eliza, "a bit of an embarassement" for his family (313), is re-sold on eBay to another owner – one only interested in her original function.

Not completely 'cleaned' in her 'software' (if it is the right term), she continues to live with the words, stories, and memories taught by her previous owner (or partner?), which are now also her own words, stories, and memories. The novel states that Eliza finds herself "confused" and asks the question: "Is this a feeling?" (ibid.)[19].

This very question echoes the ontological and ethical uncertainties faced by Charlie in McEwan's *Machines like Me* as he struggles to categorise Adam not merely as an advanced piece of technology, but as a being whose cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities challenge conventional distinctions between the human and the artificial.

To conclude, in the texts analysed in this essay, the crisis of the human, does not simply result into catastrophic imageries, visions of extinctions, or fear about possible futures. Instead, it calls for radical and necessary acts of reconsideration and re-vision – acts that concern not only the future of humanity but also its pasts. Returning to one of the purposes of utopia (and science fiction as well as dystopia) identified by Jameson and cited at the beginning of this paper, these texts serve to make "us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment" (2005, xiii). Furthermore, pushing the readers above and beyond the boundaries of the human, these narratives embody Braidotti's definition of art as inherently posthuman:

> By transposing us beyond the confines of bound identities, art becomes necessarily inhuman, in the sense of nonhuman, in that it connects to the animal, the vegetable, earthy and planetary forces that surround us. Art is also, moreover, cosmic in its resonance and hence posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of what our embodied selves can do or endure. (2013, 107)

[19] For a reflection on sex robots "as both representational objects and vital matter", see also DeFalco (2023).

The machine, the android, the Artificial Intelligence – both negatively and positively, both as omens of extinction and as a wonder of immortality – teach us that there are (and there have always been) many possible forms of being human, many possibilities of becoming human, and, recalling Butler's theorisations, many living 'creatures' differently shaped who actually counts as life. Going beyond our anthropomorphic principles and parameters, our "sensory knowledge" (Jameson 2005, 120), implies once again expanding the category of the human and at the same time reducing and desacralising it: recognising that there are many forms of life also requires the acceptance that one's own (human) life is just one among the many possible (also non-human) lives.

To borrow Donna Haraway's vocabulary, it means acknowledging that life is an interaction of companion species and that "[t]o be one is always to *become with* many" (2007, 4): many who help and sustain us but whom we, as humans, still struggle to accept and recognise.

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Visual Media

Aniara. 2018. Directed by Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja. Meta Film Stockholm, Unbranded Pictures, Viaplay, Film Capital Stockholm Fond, Gotlands Filmfond, Ljud & Bildmedia.

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"My" David Lodge: Recollections Punctuated by Coincidences

ABSTRACT

On the occasion of David Lodge's death, in this invited short memoir Roberta Mullini, former professor of English literature at the University of Urbino, traces the history of her personal literary relationship with David Lodge through reading, teaching and writing about his novels. An appendix with comments about Lodge by some former students of hers concludes the article.

KEYWORDS: David Lodge; narratology; novels.

1. Back to the last century

David Lodge passed away on 1 January 2025, and in the following days, the major international newspapers devoted obituaries to him, recollecting his academic and literary career and the main events in his life. What follows, though, is not meant to be an obituary, but only an explanation for my own academic 'passion' for his novels.

The obituary in *The New York Times* on 5 January 2025 was subtitled "His 15 well-plotted novels teemed with romance and strange coincidence" (Cotter 2025), and I would say that many coincidences have also marked my relationship with Lodge's narrative and with him as a person, since 1975. That year, a colleague of mine (I was teaching at the University of Bologna then) arrived flourishing a book: it was David Lodge's *Changing Places*, in its first hardcover edition. He accompanied his gestures with laughter and comments about the quality of the novel, the engaging narrative, and the intriguing setting. As many readers now know, especially after Lodge's novels have been translated all over the world, the events of *Changes Places* take place on two (fictional) university campuses, Rummidge in the UK and Plotinus in the USA. The parallels between those events on the one hand, and the situations in Italian universities on the other were not immediate, but there were some, particularly concerning the caricature and satire of academic life, of its subtle but sometimes perfidious jealousies, of its struggle for power. I read the novel then, even if I was not fully immersed in university life yet, and therefore I did not understand all the references underpinning the satire (they became clearer on my second reading…).

For me that was the first time I heard David Lodge's name and encountered his work. Five years later, in 1980, I attended one of the first conferences of AIA (the Italian Association of Anglicists), where Lodge was one of the panelists at a round table about contemporary narrative theory. To say the least, he surprised me, because my a-bit-prejudiced idea of British critics as rather reluctant to accept European continental narratology was dispelled by his competence and, I'd say, benevolent understanding of literary criticism prospering this side of the Channel. Lodge was then still professor of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, but, as I got to know, he had also written some early novels beyond volumes of literary criticism, which were later reprinted when, thanks to

his campus novels, he gained fame. Another five years passed, and I happened to be a participant in the 1985 British Council (BC) Summer Seminar in Cambridge, where Lodge and other contemporary writers took part to present and discuss their own recent works (there were also Malcolm Bradbury, Arnold Wesker and Margaret Drabble among others). The venue was at Trinity College, the entrance to which was (and still is) just opposite Heffers Booksellers, whose shop windows were full of the latest volumes published by the authors the BC had invited. Among these, there was the just-released Penguin pocket edition of *Small World*, the sequel, so to speak, of *Changing Places*, because of the presence in the plot of the two main protagonists of the previous novel. All participants rushed to buy Lodge's fresh product and asked him to sign their personal copies (of course, I still have mine, happily preserved over time and the repeated readings). I was very shy and did not exchange a word with him, but started reading and enjoying the book.

After Cambridge, I began reading Lodge's novels extensively, from those he was publishing (at intervals of more or less four years) to those he had written before gaining fame after *Changing Places* and *Small World*. On the whole my attention was attracted in particular by *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965, reissued in 1981) and by *How Far Can You Go* (1980), because, on the one hand, of the religious themes they explored and their parallels with the situation of Catholics all over the world concerning sexuality and contraception, together with the expectations during and after the Second Vatican Council in the Sixties, and, on the other, for the structure and the general layout of the stories. All this, including the most serious subjects, was spiced up with Lodge's ability in the comic mode.

2. Teaching David Lodge's novels

I have always commuted from home to the universities where I happened to be teaching at a particular time, and I remember laughing inwardly – and sometimes quite overtly – when reading funny details and situations from one of Lodge's novels while on a train, so that sometimes I had to explain why to my fellow travellers. In the long run, the pleasure of reading Lodge's narrative increased so much, along with my admiration for his narrative and discursive traits, that I

decided to transfer it to my students as well. Starting in the mid-nineties, I included *The British Museum is Falling Down* among the set books my students were required to study for the exam of English Literature. And, a couple of times, I devoted to some of his novels the special course I was asked to teach, of course, updating the list of set books according to the author's production. For example, in the academic year 1995-96 (University of Chieti-Pescara), the readings were *The British Museum is Falling Down*, *Changing Places*, *Small World*, *Nice Work* (1988), and *Paradise News* (1992), while in 2001-02 (University of Urbino) the more recent *Therapy* (1995) replaced *Paradise News* in the list. The main bulk of them remained, in any case, the campus novels for their being all written "in the comic mode" and for their enthralling structure.[1]

Besides writing novels, though, David Lodge was also (or rather started as) a literary critic and for many years, even after his retirement from the University of Birmingham in 1988, he published lucid analyses of various authors' works, and discussions of (plus forewords and/or afterwords to) his own production. For example, *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002) among chapters devoted to how consciousness is represented in Charles Dickens, E. M. Forster, Henry James and other novelists, also includes a final chapter titled "A Conversation about *Thinks*…", i.e. his own latest novel at the time, dealing with the competition between literature and Artificial Intelligence in reproducing human thinking processes. This interest in the development of science and technology, quite evident in *Thinks*… which in a way anticipates the discussion connected to the moral and regulatory issues of A.I., is not limited to this work. It was already present as early as *Small World*, where a character, Robin Dempsey, working at the University of Rummidge Computer Centre, is obsessed with the possibility of 'talking' with a machine by means of a software program called "ELIZA" to get useful answers to his personal depression.[2] Needless to say, Robin does not solve his psychological problems, nor can Eliza help him: after his query to the machine on what to do, the computer's answer is "SHOOT YOURSELF" (all

[1] *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work* were also published together in a single volume, under slightly different titles: *A David Lodge Trilogy* (1993) and *The Campus Trilogy* (2011).

[2] ELIZA, the "mother" of all chatbots as it has been called, was developed at MIT in the mid-1960s by Joseph Weizenbaum.

capitals in the text; Lodge 1985, 309), simply because the head of the department has tampered with the program in order to prank his colleague. Dempsey does not kill himself, but the computer's answer in the novel seems to anticipate certain very dangerous self-harm and suicidal feelings triggered by some social media nowadays. As has become clearer and clearer, machines must be fed with data, either correct or falsified, always designed by humans, hence the ethical problems of using A.I. still today. Lodge recalls ELIZA in *Thinks*…, defining it "a well-known program", part of "an interactive virtual reality" scheme, "that acts like a psychiatric counsellor" (Lodge 2001, 278): read now, he sounds like a precursor of future happenings.

In the last chapter of *Consciousness and the Novel*, Lodge declares: "I'm a metafictional novelist, I suppose, because I was a teacher of fiction and therefore a very self-conscious novelist." (Lodge 2002, 296). This aspect of Lodge's writing was what interested me greatly as a university teacher and a literary critic myself, so I decided to use his *The Art of Fiction* (1992) as a guide for my students in the field of narratology because of its (relatively) easy way into narrative and its devices. This book is not an academic volume per se, but a collection of Lodge's (revised and expanded) weekly contributions to *The Independent on Sunday* in the early 1990s about prose fiction, devised for a more general public than university students. Nevertheless, I believed that a book explaining literary theory in a 'human' way, without any esoteric jargon, would be quite helpful to my students, who were not supposed to become literary critics but needed to grasp the difference, let's say, at least between interior monologue and stream of consciousness.

3. Writing about David Lodge

Lodge's deep awareness of the forms of writing (and communicating) and his interest in narratology went beyond his volumes of literary criticism tout-court, but also flowed into his novels, shaping them in a riveting hybridization of discursive forms, i.e., a fascinating mixture of various and sundry types of narrative devices (journals, dialogues, phone calls, quotations, correspondence, email exchanges, narrator's intrusions etc.), visible in most of his novels, in particular, in my opinion, in *Therapy* (1995) and in *Thinks*… (2001).

After my first course on Lodge's novels (1995-96), I decided that I wanted to write something about this author, but it was not until 2001 that my *Il demone della forma. Intorno ai romanzi di David Lodge* was published. As the title suggests, in that booklet I focused on the formal and structural aspects of his fiction, while also showing a decisive interest in the paratexts of his writings. The title, also to homage Lodge's love for quotations, parody, and pastiche, is the translation into Italian of a phrase from his second novel, *Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962), when – in the "Prologue" – the narrator realises that his previous jottings and notes about his military service could improve into a better narrative, when "the demon Form began to whisper in my ear about certain alterations and revisions" (1984, 10 [1962]).

Before the end of 2000, my research about Lodge's novels had reached a conclusion, but I needed to know something that only the author could explain to me. Therefore, despite my reluctance to intrude into other people's lives, I decided to write to him: it was 11 November 2000 (I still have a copy of the formal letter I sent by 'snail' mail – email was not so in use in those days, at least in Italy). To my great and delighted surprise, ten days later, he wrote back (to my email address, this time), offering generous answers to my queries. He also added that "You may be interested to know that I have a new novel, entitled 'THINKS...' coming out in March 2001".[3]

For a strange and very pleasant coincidence, at the beginning of March 2001 Lodge's book and mine were published, almost simultaneously. As I had promised, I sent him a copy of my book and shortly afterwards I received a brand-new copy of the first edition of *Thinks…* At that point, my surprise was even greater, since the dust jacket of the novel and the cover of my book shared a striking graphic feature that we had no prior knowledge of: they both showed an empty thought bubble. The designers of the two covers (Brett Ryder – an artist now working for *The Economist* and *The Lancet* – on Lodge's side, and Alessandro Zanarini – my son – on mine) were and are totally unknown to each other. I particularly enjoyed the coincidental nature of the relationship between Lodge and me. But the 'great coincidence' was still ahead.

3 This is exactly how Lodge's message looked like (personal correspondence). From my small archive of personal exchanges come all Lodge's unpublished quotes.

4. In the 2000s

At the beginning of February 2002, I was at the British Library for my personal research. I found a seat in the Humanities Reading Room at an empty desk near one visibly occupied by somebody who was not there at the moment. After placing my bag and baggage on the table, I got up heading towards the paper catalogues (they still existed!), when I was struck by a person whose features I trembled at recognising: from my personal recollections dating back nearly twenty years, and especially from the photograph of David Lodge on a flap of the dust jacket of *Thinks*…, there he was! David Lodge was just a few feet away from me, with his thick eyebrows and a bob haircut. After quickly pondering whether to approach him or not, I restrained the shyness that would have pushed me silent back to my seat. Then I headed towards him and introduced myself, reminding him of our email and book exchange. He was extremely kind and offered to meet at one of the BL cafés for a cup of tea about an hour afterwards.[4] I was more than thrilled. But coincidences had not finished yet.

After looking up what I needed in the catalogues, I went back to my seat, the table near mine still empty. After a while, a person arrived and sat down: it was David Lodge! So, even if we had not met in the library consultation area, on that day I would have seen him anyway, the two of us sitting almost elbow to elbow. A great coincidence indeed.

Our letter exchange did not last long, but in December of the same year, I wrote to him again because a student of mine asked me for his email address. She was, in her words, "fascinated" by Lodge's writing, which she found "formidable" and "terrific". He agreed on my passing his address to her, but I do not know how things developed. What I know is that my students enjoyed Lodge's novels and appreciated his narrative.[5]

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[4] Later, while chatting over our tea at the King's Library Café, Lodge lamented that he was afflicted by hearing loss and by the problems deriving from his hearing device. When I read *Deaf Sentence* (2008), I recognised some autobiographical traits in the misadventures of Desmond Bates, the deaf protagonist of the novel.

[5] In the Appendix at the end of this article the reader can find some comments by former students of mine about their 'Lodgian' university course. I am very grateful to them.

The last time I emailed him was after reading the first volume of his autobiography (*Quite a Good Time to Be Born*, 2015). It was already the end of 2017. Lodge answered just a couple of hours after I contacted him, informing me that the second volume (*Writer's Luck*, 2018) was about to be published, and inviting me to read it: "I think you will find it interesting – indeed, if you don't, nobody will" is what he wrote to me (6 November 2017). This made me feel – quite immodestly, I confess – like a sort of "model reader" of his works.

He started his answer with "By a curious coincidence, I came across *Il demone della forma* in my study just the other day, after many years during which it was undisturbed.". And just before finishing his letter, he added: "I suppose it's another coincidence that you should write to me about that first memoir [2015] when I am awaiting the first bound copy of my second one [2018]".

Yes, Professor Lodge: as you wrote to me once (15 February 2002), "it was a pleasant and novelistically contrived meeting we had" at the British Library many years ago. In the end, a lot has happened "by coincidence". My luck is that these coincidences have been many.

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[6] Readers interested in an almost complete bibliography of David Lodge's works can find it at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Lodge_(author). Besides novels and literary criticism, it also includes Lodge's plays, scripts for television adaptations, and novelistic biographies.

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Appendix

Students' comments from the universities of Chieti-Pescara and Urbino

Reading David Lodge at University instead of a classic was unexpectedly eye-opening. At first, I was surprised by the teacher's choice, it felt almost too light-hearted for an academic setting. But as I got deeper into his satire, I realized how amazingly he juggled with Catholic faith paradoxes and the mimicry of the style of famous writers like Joyce and Kafka as in *The British Museum is Falling Down*. Lodge doesn't just entertain; he also holds up a mirror to academic life, exposing its contradictions, egos, and rituals with wit and precision. It made me reflect more critically on the university experience itself, something a traditional classic

might not have done so directly. In a way, reading Lodge was both a study of literature and the culture that surrounds it.

Luca Luciani (actor, dubber and voice trainer), academic year 1995-96

As a student, I loved *Small World* because when I went to study in Sheffield and Exeter, it made me feel like Persse McGarrigle. I had the opportunity to meet some academics and attend literature conferences around Europe, becoming acquainted with world-renowned professors. Just like in the novel, every meeting between people from different countries was not a coincidence because I used literature as a way of life: coincidences seemed to be part of a more compelling plot in which to find meaning, or at least a hidden pattern. Looking back at those academic experiences thirty years later, I have to confess I am grateful to David Lodge since his novels helped me laugh at my clumsy attempt to play my part in this great wooden O. This commentary is about to end because "without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just... end." (*Changing Places*, last page).

Vincenzo Macchiarola (English teacher and tourist guide), academic year 1995-96

Irony and desecration are the first words that come to mind if I think back to the university course I took on David Lodge. But, to be true, I have to admit that when, in my twenties, I found myself pushed to read his novels, I didn't appreciate them very much. Even though I always loved English humour and smiled at some situations and witty jokes Lodge wrote, I was very happy to quickly finish the exam and go on with those I considered more interesting studies. Now, thinking back after many years and after some university career, I realized how much his books were actually a very lucid criticism of the embalmed and corrupted university reality that doesn't differ very much even between distant countries like Italy and England. What else to say? Age and experience made me deeply reevaluate Lodge's irony and desecration.

Giada Trebeschi (novelist and actress), academic year 1995-96

I was fascinated by Professor Mullini's course on Lodge, in which his campus novels were analysed as a mix of excellent narrative, thought-provoking sociological portraits, and highly amusing stories related to his essays on literature. I remember it was love at first reading! The margins of my copies of Lodge's

novels are full of asterisks, exclamation marks, and stylised laughing mouths, which are my *manicules* for interesting, startling, and funny lines, respectively. I was made to laugh out loud and was simultaneously deeply touched by his smart snapshots of campus life, academic career, and the adventures of Philip Swallow, Adam Appleby, and Robyn Penrose. Some moments, images, and words have stuck in my memory since I read them as a twenty-something student and have resonated differently with me throughout the various stages of my life. After reading Lodge's novels, some places could never be the same again for me, most of all global academic conference venues, the green quadrangle of a campus, and, of course, the British Library!

Maria Elisa Montironi (associate professor of English Literature), academic year 2001-02

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"Spostare il centro del mondo." Un ricordo di Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, 1938-2025

ABSTRACT

In questa nota su invito, Federica Zullo delinea i principali elementi biografici, teorici e narrativi dello scrittore, poeta e drammaturgo keniota Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1938-2025), figura centrale del pensiero postcoloniale, concentrandosi in particolare sulla sua rilettura del canone inglese, attraverso il concetto di 'globalettica'.

KEYWORDS: Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o; 'globalettica'; letteratura postcoloniale.

Nel 2010, lo scrittore, poeta e drammaturgo keniota Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o è chiamato a tenere le Wellek Library Lectures presso il Critical Theory Institute della University of California, Irvine. Questa istituzione accademica ospita la biblioteca personale di teoria critica di Réné Wellek e dal 1981 la figura del teorico della letteratura viene omaggiata ogni anno. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o nel 2010 era Distinguished Professor di Comparative Literature a Irvine e ha sempre manifestato grande riconoscenza nei confronti di Wellek per il fatto di aver promosso il dialogo fra lingue, culture e letterature, a partire dal volume *Theory of Literature* (1942) scritto con Warren, in cui veniva presentato l'approccio comparatistico negli studi letterari, lamentando la scarsità di contatto fra gli studenti di lingue diverse, europee e non solo.

Per introdurre la base teorica comune alle quattro lezioni, Ngugi espone il concetto di 'globalettica' (divenuto poi il titolo del volumetto pubblicato da Jacabook nel 2019), ricavato dalla forma del globo, sulla cui superficie non esiste un centro: ogni punto è ugualmente centrale, e, rispetto al centro al suo interno, tutti i punti della superficie sono equidistanti da esso – come i raggi della ruota di una bicicletta che si congiungono nel mozzo.

Il termine ha in sé la parola dialettica, con riferimento alla dialettica hegeliana e in particolare a quella signore-servo esposta nella *Fenomenologia dello spirito*. Tale relazione viene presentata dallo scrittore keniota nelle sue più vaste implicazioni riguardanti le relazioni di potere ineguali che sottendono l'economia, la politica, l'etica e l'estetica, nel contesto coloniale e postcoloniale. Le prime due lezioni affrontano questioni relative alla letteratura canonica inglese e al suo studio e apprendimento in ambito coloniale, esperienza biografica dello stesso Ngugi, il quale torna sulle ambiguità, i conflitti e le strategie di sopravvivenza nel rapporto fra 'il signore britannico e il servo coloniale'. A partire dalle dicotomie letterarie Prospero – Calibano e Crusoe – Venerdì si analizzano l'educazione del servo e l'insegnamento del signore, mostrando il graduale approdo a un nuovo modo di leggere la letteratura inglese attraverso la dialettica marxiana, la negritudine e Frantz Fanon. Le ultime due lezioni propongono con forza uno sguardo globale alla letteratura, mettendo in luce le potenzialità della cosiddetta *orature*, la letteratura orale messa al bando durante la dominazione coloniale e assai viva oggi in tanti paesi del mondo, non solo in quelli africani.

Con il tono pungente e polemico che già caratterizzava l'importante saggio *Spostare il centro del mondo* (1992), Ngugi propone nuove sfide all'organizzazione dello spazio letterario globale, non tanto sulla teoria e la pratica della World Literature, di cui sottolinea l'importante sviluppo e le potenzialità, ma piuttosto sul concetto di 'globalettica', in quanto descrive un dialogo che influisce su tutti gli interlocutori, un multilogo che abbraccia l'interezza, l'interconnessione, la tensione e il movimento.

Su questi temi Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o ha sempre scritto e riflettuto, sia in ambito saggistico che nella produzione letteraria, opponendosi alle costrizioni della libertà di pensiero e di movimento, avendo fatto esperienza personale del carcere e dell'esilio. Il suo lavoro creativo e militante ha riguardato sessant'anni di storia, soprattutto quella coloniale e postcoloniale del Kenya, il paese d'origine di cui ha narrato le vicende e le trasformazioni da colonia britannica a democrazia indipendente.

James Thiong'o Ngũgĩ, poi solo Ngũgĩ, nato nel 1938 nella cittadina di Limuru da una famiglia di agricoltori, grazie ai risparmi del padre era riuscito a frequentare la Alliance School gestita da missionari britannici, la prima scuola secondaria per africani del paese; ha poi studiato letteratura inglese nella prestigiosa Università di Makerere in Uganda e in seguito a Leeds nel Regno Unito. È stato docente di Letteratura Inglese all'Università di Nairobi fino al 1977, anno della sua incarcerazione in quanto oppositore al governo del dittatore Daniel arap Moi e, dopo il rilascio nel 1978, è costretto ad un esilio forzato in Gran Bretagna e negli Stati Uniti, dove è stato Professore di Inglese e Letteratura Comparata a Yale, New York e, infine, a Irvine.

I suoi romanzi, le opere teatrali e la saggistica lo hanno reso uno scrittore di fama mondiale più volte candidato al Premio Nobel, una voce critica divenuta punto di riferimento per le questioni storico-culturali e linguistiche di ambito coloniale e postcoloniale, dal tono provocatorio e incisivo. Nel *memoir* pubblicato nel 2012, *Nella casa dell'interprete* (Jaca Book, 2019), Ngũgĩ aveva raccontato il periodo trascorso alla Alliance High School, dal 1954 al 1958, definendo la scuola come "l'unico lascito della fase solidale e magnanima delle missioni" (p. 19). Era stata fondata nel 1926 da varie chiese presenti nel paese grazie al finanziamento di una fondazione statunitense impegnata nel sistema di istruzione ottocentesco per i nativi americani e gli afroamericani. Il progetto educativo portato avanti era

in tutta evidenza opposto e contraddittorio: "la nozione di autonomia e l'obiettivo di produrre neri dotati di senso civico che avrebbero lavorato entro i parametri dello stato razziale esistente" (p. 19). Sia in America che nei paesi africani di dominazione britannica quel sistema non conobbe spesso gli effetti desiderati e Ngũgĩ ha sempre esposto, sia nel *memoir* che nei saggi e romanzi, le ragioni di tale fallimento. In *Decolonising the Mind* del 1981 (*Decolonizzare la mente,* Jaca Book 2015), spiegava come, durante il colonialismo, la lingua diviene strumento di potere e si allea con le strutture educative, le quali, come un Giano bifronte, contribuiscono alla crescita culturale del territorio, ma rivelano allo stesso tempo gli elementi pericolosi di separazione e discriminazione razziale. La scrittura postcoloniale si trova così a definire sé stessa posizionando il linguaggio e la tradizione letteraria del colonizzatore al centro della propria sfera d'indagine: dopo aver letto romanzi in cui l'imperialismo era normale, la resistenza all'imperialismo era immorale, Ngũgĩ decide di iniziare a leggere i libri con maggiore spirito critico visto che nessuno rifletteva la sua condizione di nero. La scoperta di quello che è divenuto un classico della letteratura sudafricana di lingua inglese, *Cry the Beloved Country* (*Piangi, terra amata,* 1948) di Alan Paton, lo porta ad avvicinarsi ad altri autori che avevano scritto sul tema della razza e del colore, da Kwame Nkrumah, leader del Ghana indipendente nel 1957, a Jomo Kenyatta, W.E.B. DuBois, Peter Abrahams, e l'amico Chinua Achebe. In tutto il *memoir* si legge la crescente consapevolezza di un giovane figlio dell'educazione coloniale rispetto al proprio posto nel mondo e a quanto sia necessaria una battaglia per lo spostamento del centro verso un pluralismo di culture. È questo il tema dei saggi di *Moving the Centre* del 1993 (*Spostare il centro del mondo*, Meltemi 2000), opera in cui ribadisce il fatto che il sapere locale non è un'isola, ma parte dal mare, il mare lo influenza ma non può sommergerlo, perché l'isola deve essere visibile e affermare la propria presenza.

Fra i primi romanzi degli anni Sessanta, *Weep not, Child*, 1964 (*Se ne andranno le nuvole devastatrici*, 1975), racconta la vita degli abitanti in un villaggio rurale del Kenya e il conflitto fra cristiani e non cristiani, rievocando il celebre *Things Fall Apart* di Achebe (1958), mentre in *The River Between* (1965) inizia a comparire il tema della rivolta dei Mau-Mau, ponendola sullo sfondo di una storia d'amore contrastata fra due villaggi. È però con il celebre *A Grain of Wheat* del 1967 (*Un chicco di grano*, prima edizione Jacabook 1978) che la lotta per l'Indipendenza e

l'entusiasmo giovanile per la costruzione della nazione postcoloniale trovano un grande disegno narrativo: l'azione si svolge nei giorni che precedono l'*Uhuru*, la dichiarazione d'indipendenza del Kenya, fino a quel giorno stesso, 12 dicembre 1963, un arco temporale che grazie ad abili giochi di flash-back si estende al decennio precedente, quello dello stato d'emergenza dichiarato dal governo britannico a motivo della ribellione dei Mau Mau. Il romanzo assume anche il carattere di un giallo: ci si chiede chi avrà tradito Kihika, l'autentico eroe di Thabai, il quale, prima di essere impiccato s'interroga su cosa sia un giuramento e su quanti hanno giurato e ora venerano l'uomo bianco. Fin dal titolo stesso, l'opera si presenta ricca di metafore cristiane e riferimenti biblici, e resta una delle più interessanti "narrazioni della nazione" del mondo letterario postcoloniale, delle sue speranze e disillusioni. Queste si manifestano certamente con l'incarcerazione dello scrittore anche a seguito della pubblicazione dell'opera teatrale *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977), e Ngũgĩ arriverà alla scelta radicale di scrivere nella lingua madre kikuyu e poi di tradurre sé stesso in inglese. Lo farà per *Devil on the Cross* (*Il Diavolo in croce)* del 1982, il suo primo romanzo in kikuyu, scritto su rotoli di carta igienica nel carcere di massima sicurezza. L'opera si incentra sulle questioni dell'influenza economica internazionale nel Kenya indipendente attraverso la protagonista femminile, Jacinta Wariinga, e la sua lotta per la sopravvivenza, dopo un tentato suicidio e la dolorosa ma salvifica scoperta di sé e della sua forza. Dopo un anno di detenzione, la scarcerazione avviene anche grazie a una campagna internazionale coordinata da Amnesty International; in seguito, Ngũgĩ riprende a scrivere solo nella lingua madre in aperto contrasto con l'imperialismo linguistico dell'inglese, e continua ad essere per il regime keniota una voce scomoda e sgradita.

L'atmosfera di terrore e paranoia riguardo alla polizia segreta M5 di cui parla nel suo ultimo romanzo *Wizard of the Crow* del 2006 (*Il mago dei corvi*, 2019) trova radici nelle istituzioni del governo di arap Moi. La storia è ambientata nell'immaginaria Repubblica Libera di Aburiaria, governata autocraticamente da un uomo, conosciuto solo come il Sovrano. Il tono della narrazione è satirico e grottesco, caratterizzato da un notevole *black humour*, sebbene mai troppo cupo: non è la prima volta che Ngugi scava in maniera sistematica nella corruzione e nei meandri di un potere malato. *Il mago dei corvi*, epico nella sua forma e lunghezza, non è solamente il racconto di un paese oppresso da un diabolico

presidente, bensì il ritratto di una società aperta, multiculturale, per nulla chiusa dentro i propri confini. I personaggi, incluso il Presidente, parlano lo swahili, la lingua che Ngugi propone in *Spostare il centro del mondo* come la nuova lingua franca di tutta l'Africa da opporre all'inglese, ed è interessante come una delle protagoniste femminili parli all'amica e della sua militanza politica e femminista citando solo scrittrici africane e indiane, note e meno note nel panorama internazionale come Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Arundhati Roy e Meena Alexander, come se Ngugi stesso volesse ribadire il loro posto di rilievo nel canone delle letterature anglofone contemporanee. Mancherà, nel panorama letterario mondiale, la sua voce critica e costruttiva, aperta a tutti i 'centri' del mondo e legata al potere salvifico della narrazione.

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"From the Top of Newgate to the Bottom": An Album of Victorian Murderers

The next two articles are part of a broader research trajectory on Victorian murderers. The essays by Joseph Crawford and Carolyn Oulton present an excellent introduction to the topic. The Victorian period provides an unforgettable gallery of magnificent murderers. From the Newgate Novel tradition at the beginning of the century, through De Quincey's aesthetic musings on the fine art of murder, to Arthur Machen's decadent impostors/assassins at the end of the century, ingenious killers have been represented on stage, in song and ballads, all the various forms of material culture and, of course, literature and the popular press. Further contributions will follow, with the aim of reconstructing a multimedia map of the archipelagic narrative of murder across the nineteenth-century.

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Incidental Murder: Mary Cholmondeley's Sensational Humour

ABSTRACT

Mary Cholmondeley's *The Danvers Jewels* is a serio-comic homage to the 1860s sensation novel, serialised in *Temple Bar* from January to March 1887 and published anonymously in volume form later that year. The novella draws on domestic realism, sensation and humour to investigate the construction of class and gender roles: a combination that would become characteristic of Cholmondeley's mature fiction including *Diana Tempest* (1893) and *Red Pottage* (1899). *The Danvers Jewels* and its publishing history show the author developing a critical network, as she balanced her own experiments in genre with the demands of the commercial market. The extant correspondence between Cholmondeley and a range of well-connected figures offers a test case for examining tensions between women writers' sense of a literary vocation and the necessary negotiation of a professional network.

KEYWORDS: Cholmondeley; Bentley; Sensation; Crime; Jewels

Mary Cholmondeley is most often discussed as the author of bestselling New Woman novel *Red Pottage* (1899). *The Danvers Jewels*, serialised in *Temple Bar* from January to March 1887 and published anonymously in volume form later that year, has received comparatively little attention. Written when Cholmondeley was twenty seven, the novella is a serio-comic homage to the 1860s sensation novel, and is suggestive of what we might term the intersectional modes shaping late-Victorian women's writing. This early work draws on domestic realism, sensation and humour to investigate the construction of class and gender roles: a combination that would become characteristic of Cholmondeley's mature fiction including *Diana Tempest* (1893) and *Red Pottage*. *The Danvers Jewels* and its publishing history show the author developing a critical network, as she balanced her own experiments in genre with the demands of the commercial market. The extant correspondence between Cholmondeley and a range of well-connected figures offers a test case for examining tensions between the literary vocation and the negotiation of a professional network.

On hearing that her novella had been accepted for publication, Cholmondeley wrote bitterly in her diary that it had been written "when I was in the depths last winter. I hated doing it. … Bright and humorous, is it? I look back with a sort of grim smile at the darkness and depression out of which this brightness and humour came." (Cholmondeley 17 August 1886; cited in Lubbock 1927, 83). Not surprisingly, she assured herself that "There is better stuff in me than that which I put in this story, but not the same kind of stuff" (ibid., 84). She was right on both counts. Nonetheless *The Danvers Jewels* experiments in interesting ways with what Carra Glatt terms "The inherent hybridity of most works of Victorian realism – whose generic affiliations may be indeterminate until late in the novel and often remain a matter of critical dispute" (44). Cholmondeley's early career speaks to the "multi-vocal patterns" and intergenerational influences characteristic of women's writing during these years (Gavin and Oulton 2024, 5).

On the one hand, "Victorian society could not define the late-century feminist figure as easily as it had defined the good woman and the bad woman" (Das 2024, 11). But on the other, the 1886 trial of Adelaide Bartlett for poisoning her husband reminded an excited public that women were literally dangerous. The possibilities for female characters in the 1880s thus included both domestic

efficiency and criminal propensities. These varied concerns fed directly into the literary modes in circulation during these years. Indeed Maurizio Ascari argues that "It is in these border-territories that processes of creative innovation often take place." (Ascari, 2007, xii) Barry Godfrey notes that, "Even though the misery they caused was deep and distressful, cases of murder were comparatively rare" (Godfrey 2014, 7). Nonetheless, murder was a particular source of fascination to late-Victorian readers. Undeterred by their more conservative opponents, women authors continued to respond to the earlier trend for sensational tropes.

What came to be known as the Great Fiction Debate included sometimes heated exchanges about both authors' rights and the value of new forms of writing. But crucially, it also involved serious consideration of whether 1860s sensation titles should be included in public libraries. In its disruption of the marriage plot inherent in much domestic realism, the sensation novel creates an interdependence between two seemingly different genres. It is notoriously both titillating and disturbing, precisely because it locates dramatic crime in domestic settings. And helpfully for women, their supposed eye for small details was an essential skill for crime writers. As Judith Flanders pithily expresses it, "Observing was an equal-opportunities occupation in fiction" (Flanders 2011, 297). By the 1880s women were also able to draw on sophisticated, and crucially respectable models that incorporated criminal plots, including George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872).

It is easy to forget that this decade also saw various experiments with literary humour. Importantly, Tamara Wagner references the ways in which "the increasingly critical, even tongue-in-cheek, invocation of sensation fiction's most prevalent tropes testifies to its adaptability" (Wagner 209, 211). But humour, like sensation fiction, had the tendency to become politically divisive: by the end of the 1880s criticism of the largely masculine New Humour was being used to reinforce class differences; in the 1890s feminists became the target of jokes directed at the "New Woman". To complicate matters further, Margaret Stetz argues that "Women in general and feminists in particular at the close of the nineteenth century were allegedly too psychologically unbalanced to appreciate the sanity and healthfulness of jokes" (Stetz 2000, 221). Cholmondeley herself always set a high value on a sense of humour, claiming that her invalid mother

had been 'sometimes helped by her sense of humour' in the struggle with her "anxious, over-apprehensive mind" (*Under One Roof* 1918, 50).

The Danvers Jewels achieves a tone of amused detachment through the deployment of an unreliable narrator, a country house setting, a scapegrace heir and a few breezily dismissed murders. Cholmondeley's innovation is to pastiche the sensational plot of *The Moonstone* and co-opt it into the service of comedy, through the misguided assertions of an unreliable narrator. Much of the humour derives from the novella's self-conscious use of familiar sensation tropes: theft, bigamy and murder are all duly registered by the characters.

The story begins with Col. Middleton being summoned to the deathbed of the irascible Sir John in India. Cholmondeley's debt to *The Moonstone* (1870) has long been recognised, and the decision to set the first scene in India suggests a deliberate echo of Wilkie Collins's novel. The catalyst for the plot is Sir John's decision to entrust Middleton with a bag of plundered gems, with instructions to deliver them to Ralph Danvers (the son of the woman he once wanted to marry) in England. The brutal Sir John freely admits that he has stolen the jewels he is now giving to Ralph Danvers. His confession is embedded in a series of comments on his character confided to the reader by Middleton. Admittedly in *The Danvers Jewels* "India takes on the status of a curiosity" (Murphy 2009, 134) and the narrator "situates the gems within merely a fragment of context" (ibid., 135). Cholmondeley's interest in international politics is confined here to a few vague hints about the abuse of colonial subjects. But if the casual asides are not interpreted or fully registered by Middleton, they remain available for the reader to interpret. Retribution of some kind is surely to be expected.

The morning after his conversation with Middleton, news breaks that Sir John has himself been murdered.

> Murdered in the night! Cathcart heard a noise and went in, and stumbled over him on the floor. As he came in he saw the lamp knocked over, and a figure rush out through the veranda. The moon was bright, and he saw a man run across a clear space in the moonlight—a tall, slightly built man in native dress, but not a native, Cathcart said; that he would take his oath on, by his build. (13)

On the boat back to England, the naïve Middleton befriends an American called Carr, and having first confided the secret of the jewels to him, secures his

invitation to the Danvers estate as a stand-in for a guest who has had to pull out of the family's amateur theatricals. Unlike the ingenuous Middleton, the reader versed in sensation fiction immediately grasps Carr's dubious motives for pursuing this acquaintance.

Despite its sensational trappings, *The Danvers Jewels* avoids cashing in on its shocking prologue. When Sir John himself is murdered, there is no sense of his death as a providential intervention or even an act of justice. Rather the incidental murder becomes a subsidiary plotline and even a comic device. Once the action moves to London, a second death is treated in desultory terms as a strange coincidence. Middleton has given Carr his sister's last address, only to find that she has moved in the years since he has been in India. The hapless landlady of the original lodgings is killed during a break-in that night. A day later Jane Middleton fends off two intruders with a policeman's rattle.

The narrative itself obfuscates the question of how the previous landlady died. Middleton's first informant is the baker's boy. "'It's murder!' he said, with relish. 'Burgilars in the night.'" (20) According to a policemen, "The poor lady had not been murdered … but, being subject to heart complaint, had died in the night of an acute attack, evidently brought on by fright" (20). In recounting the story to Charles, Middleton revives the original theory that "a poor woman was murdered in Jane's old house" (44). Clearly the incident has had little effect on him, "I remember it especially, because I went to the house by mistake, not knowing Jane had moved" (44). Later in the novel Charles summarises the events leading up to the theft, including the attack on the London house, and how "the poor woman in it is murdered, *or* dies of fright" (58, emphasis added). The sequel *Sir Charles Danvers* (1889) shows a similar instability, when the heroine's brother Raymond Deyncourt is hit round the head by a gamekeeper. Deyncourt assures Charles that he was already dying of his injuries after a fall while trying to escape. In the world of the novel, this incident apparently requires no further investigation.

At the same time, the overt influence of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* heightens the comic treatment of Ralph's fiancée, the apparently vacuous Aurelia. Lucy Audley is routinely described in terms of her childish beauty, with "the most wonderful curls in the world – soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through

them" (13). Aurelia is also repeatedly characterised through her appearance, and the reader's response to her is necessarily overdetermined, filtered as it is through the blundering and clearly smitten Middleton. Too good to be true and implausibly stupid, it is no surprise when Aurelia is revealed to be the thief. The joke works, not because she is inherently funny but because her representation is out of date.

From the start of her career, Cholmondeley had been deeply interested in the construction of gender. One of her first stories, "Geoffrey's Wife" (1885), plays with cultural identities through the figures of a young couple on honeymoon in Paris. The bride Eva is a forerunner of Aurelia; although in the story the character's childish dependence is genuine, it is inappropriate for the 1880s and marks her as unfit for the modern environment. When Geoffrey and the delicate Eva are caught up in an angry crowd, the fragile woman has to be physically carried by her husband, with tragic results.

Aurelia's parodic performance reworks the earlier motif of the fragile young woman as untrustworthy and manipulative. Readers of Braddon's text should quickly pick up clues, both through Aurelia's petulant blonde prettiness, and in the family's concerns that she is of unknown family. The holiday encounter is a familiar ploy in sensation fiction, but is here treated parodically. Charles explains to Middleton that Charles first met Aurelia in Switzerland:

> Lovely orphan sat by Lady Mary at *table d'hôte*. Read tracts presented by Lady Mary. Made acquaintance. Lovely orphan's travelling companion or governess discovered to be live sister of defunct travelling companion or governess of Lady Mary. Result, warm friendship. Ralph, like a dutiful nephew, appears on the scene. Fortnight of fine weather. Interesting expeditions. Romantic attachment, cemented by diamond and pearl ring from Hunt & Roskell's. (28-9)

Nonetheless Patricia Murphy notes "the family's inability to penetrate the guise of a conventional Victorian maiden, albeit a highly petulant one, that she adopts to conceal her felonious scheme." (Murphy 2009, 142) The suspicious Charles comments that "he admired her complexion most because it was so thoroughly well done, and the coloring was so true to nature" (280). But perceptive though he is, he assumes until the end that she is "a pink-and-white nonentity, without an idea beyond a neat adjustment of pearl-powder" (88).

The novella's strategy of drawing on sensational tropes is overtly intertextual. In 1862 Braddon had used shock tactics to deride purblind responses to feminine beauty, as the murderous outsider uses her looks to inveigle her way into an upper-class household. Lucy Audley's blonde prettiness allows her to get away with the murder of Luke Marks, at least. In *The Danvers Jewels*, the jewels are stolen on the night of the play and suspicion instantly attaches to the scapegrace oldest son Charles, who is known to be in debt and claims to have discovered the theft in the middle of the night. Carr, the obvious suspect, is found to have slept in the lodge rather than in the house. The mystery is resolved when Aurelia is discovered with a tell-tale piece of paper used to wrap the jewels, and absconds a few hours later. She is revealed as Carr's wife when she is killed in a train crash while trying to escape with the jewels.

Aurelia's original scheme to steal Lady Mary's jewels has necessitated her presence in the house, which in turn suggests the more ambitious theft. The underlying premise of *The Danvers Jewels* – that a married couple should plot to obtain one set of jewels, only to find themselves in the same house angling for another – is particularly implausible. But "Of course sensation novels are implausible. That is the point" (Glatt 48). While Aurelia stops short of bigamy, the scenario again suggests a debt to *Lady Audley's Secret* as well as *The Moonstone*. But readers, as Cholmondeley knows full well, will not fall for the same trick twice. The literal unveiling is not so much a plot twist as a knowing intertextual joke - in a moment of allusive irony, Aurelia is shown to be wearing a wig over her own dark hair. To Middleton's horror, the change "so completely altered the dead face that I could hardly recognize it as belonging to the same person" (84).

As in *The Moonstone*, crimes involving the upper classes are managed for preference without external agency. No suggestion is made that the police should investigate the burglary at Stoke Morton, although when the train breaks down they are seen to be "stationed here and there" (78). Instead the solution to the mystery "is patched together by a number of participants" (Flanders 375). Among them, the affable Middleton ironically sees himself as an astute amateur detective. He is indignant when Charles claims to have "pumped" him about Carr, and expresses himself as "charmed" by Aurelia's request for a serious conversation, "inwardly wondering what that little curly head would consider to be serious conversation" (65). When she cleverly deflects attention from herself

by casting aspersions on Evelyn, he congratulates himself on being "the most likely person to follow out a clew, however slight, in a case that seemed becoming [sic] more and more complicated" (66). The final explanation, that Aurelia is already married to Carr, is given by a police inspector only after her death miles from the family home.

The novella's use of a country house as the primary locale aligns it with sensation fiction and also with Julian Symons's discussion of setting as one determinant of crime (as opposed to detective) fiction. In this analysis, the environment itself is "Often important to the tone and style of the story, and frequently an integral part of the crime itself, i.e. the pressures involved in a particular way of life lead to this especial crime" (Symons 1972, 174). *The Danvers Jewels* uses the linked themes of amateur acting and burglary in high life to mediate the interactions of an inept bachelor and a dysfunctional family. But as an upper-class writer herself, Cholmondeley was not purveying a fantasy of high society for an aspirational middle class. She was writing about the world she knew best. Cholmondeley later told George Bentley (Mary Cholmondeley to George Bentley, [1890]) that the idea for *The Danvers Jewels* had occurred to her in January 1886, during the preparations for an amateur production of Tom Taylor's *To Oblige Benson*. There is no obvious link between this light comedy, in which a flirtatious young man writes a love letter to his friend's wife, and the novella. But importantly, the play was being rehearsed at her uncle Regie's house, Condover Hall in Shropshire. She would somewhat condescendingly send Bentley "a snipping of a menu" from Condover in 1895, confirming it as the original of Stoke Morton (22 January 1895).

In 1887 serialisation of her early novella in *Temple Bar* allowed Cholmondeley to develop what would become a crucial relationship with the Bentley firm. There were useful precedents for a woman author seeking to establish herself with this particular publisher. One of their authors, Rhoda Broughton, was a family friend of the Cholmondeleys. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* had been serialised in *The New Monthly Magazine* between January 1860 and September 1861, and Jennifer Phegley notes "how aggressively she hounded the Bentleys to guarantee the profitability of her novel" (Phegley 2005, 185). As Cholmondeley gained in confidence, she would begin to ask similarly demanding questions about the supply of her novel to circulating libraries. Her interactions with both her social

network and her publishers between 1886 and the takeover of the firm by Macmillan in 1898, confirms that she kept a careful eye on the market.

But negotiations for the publication of Cholmondeley's fiction did not begin with Richard Bentley. As a teenager she had spent four intense months on a manuscript (since lost or destroyed) called *Her Evil Genius*. Her diary presents this venture as very much a family concern:

> Much depends on what Mama thinks of it. I have begun reading it to her, but she has not got far yet. I am getting quite anxious about it. … I wonder what will happen to it. Will it be put by for ever in the bottom shelf of my cupboard, or will it be returned with thanks by some publisher, to whom *we* have screwed up courage to send it. Or will it again be published and remain unread, be published and run down, be published, and become popular. (Cholmondeley, Diary 16 May 1877. Emphasis added)

Even at 17, Cholmondeley shows an informed interest in the literary market and the probable fate of a first book. She registers that manuscripts are routinely turned down with a formal note of thanks; others serve simply to fuel poor reviews or saturate the market; exceptionally a novel will become popular with readers. Women authors were often accused of flooding the market with cheap fiction, in a reverse correlation between bad reviews and high sales. By contrast, the young Cholmondeley assumes that critical displeasure will kill off a new book.

By the early 1880s she was sending out material to the *Cornhill*. James Payn turned down one story with an encouraging letter (recalled in a letter Cholmondeley wrote him on 3 January 1895). Linda Peterson identified what is probably Cholmondeley's earliest journal publication, a story called "All is Fair in Love and War" published in *The Graphic* in 1882. Another early story, "Lisle's Courtship", appeared anonymously in *Household Words* in 1884. All this meant that by the time of writing *The Danvers Jewels*, Cholmondeley could draw on both family support and the experience of a literary network. The dedication to her sister Di (Diana) of "the story which she helped me to write" may refer to Diana's nursing over the winter of 1885-86.

Cholmondeley was always willing to seek advice from other writers and critics whose opinion she respected. Her cousin Edward, a fellow admirer of George Eliot, may already have had literary ambitions of his own. In an essay

for *The Cornhill* in 1888, he describes himself as trying to write a poem called "A Barrister's Outlook", because "barristers are supposed to be literary, especially the briefless ones." (Edward Cholmondeley 1888, 3) She wrote to her sister Hester that he had been "very generous in what he says of [the manuscript]" (to Hester Cholmondeley, [March 1886]) and she had made 60 grammatical and stylistic edits on his advice.

At the same time she hoped that Anne Thackeray Ritchie's husband, to whom she had written, "will be kind and help me with it" (To Hester Cholmondeley [March 1886]). Ritchie responded with a long letter, and a grateful Cholmondeley told him, "A little praise (when one knows it is not ignorant praise) is such a help. How I do hope Bentley, if he ever looks at it, will approve; but *Temple Bar* seems too good to be likely to be true" (To Richmond Ritchie 3 June [1886]). One reason for her concern was that two years earlier Bentley had turned down an essay she submitted to him on the advice of *Athenaeum* editor Norman MacColl (To Richmond Ritchie 30 June 1886).

On 9 June she wrote again to Ritchie, expressing relief that "the story (unlike Gladstone's bill) did survive the second reading", but also concern about the impact of serialisation:

> I suppose such a golden opportunity as being possibly admitted to *Temple Bar* must on no account be let slip if it presented itself, but otherwise do you not think a story like this, which is a first and inexperienced attempt would appear to greater advantage as a whole, than if it were cut up into little bits? (to Richard Ritchie 9 June 1886)

Cholmondeley's concern is how to sustain her readers' imaginative connection with the story. The inevitable breaks and distractions of serialisation allow readers to "think, talk, and read about a number of fictional worlds even as they were going about their own lives" (Gettelman 9). But this disrupted reading could also prove a strain on both sides.

In the meantime Cholmondeley had been told that Andrew Lang (who was a reader for *Longman's*) wanted to see the manuscript. While the tone of the letter is self-deprecating, Cholmondeley's drive and determination are already apparent just below the surface, as is her frustration with her situation. She is not afraid to ask her friend's husband to read the manuscript for a second time, and she is

beginning to align herself with a metropolitan literary network through an adroit use of humour, "I know I can do nothing for myself. I am nobody, and what is worse, a nobody buried in the country (the funeral takes place on Saturday)" (to Richmond Ritchie 9 June 1886). In the event, it was Ritchie who proposed the title *The Danvers Jewels*. By mid-July Cholmondeley was asking anxiously if he had secured the recommendation of Bentley author Rhoda Broughton, or if he would prefer her to approach her directly as she was due on a visit to Hodnet (15 July 1886).

Her step-uncle James Legard "was so overcome by astonishment at the contents of your letter of 20th that it has taken me a week to get over the shock to my nervous system sufficiently to frame a suitable reply" (James Legard to Mary Cholmondeley 27 September 1886). Cautiously deprecating the status of *Temple Bar*, "Bentley is not thought much of nowadays and Temple Bar is rather a one horse magazine", he nonetheless expresses pride in her achievement "and [I] hope and believe that it will lead to other successes in the future. I have always had a great opinion of your talents since you kept me awake one evening after dinner by reading me of your stories" (ibid.). He was also alive to the value of the £50 cheque Mary had received for the manuscript.

Her uncle Charles was still more snobbish and considerably less enthusiastic:

> I don't quite like all this. Mary haggling with a publisher…! Nevertheless good luck to you and 'more power to your elbow' as the Irish say. If I like your novels it will be the first time I ever liked a women's novel writing except only 'George Elliot's' [sic] (14 January 1887).

Hester's comic poem captures the mood:

> All read and praised, and all advised.
> The lawyers, authors, fools.
> And all her friends they criticised
> The charming "Danvers Jules [sic]."

Peterson confirms Legard's view of *Temple Bar* as the popular option for middle-class but not highly educated readers, "Given this middle-brow audience, Cholmondeley and her early novels were not destined for distinction" (Peterson 2001, 210). But what is notable about the varied reactions of Cholmondeley's

relations is the apparent indifference to the question of genre that underpinned the "Great Fiction Debate" during these years. As Cholmondeley herself later confirmed, there was an implicit class bias in the reception of her news by both her relations and her Shropshire set. The idea that she had allied herself with "snobs" and "outsiders" (in other words, published authors) was initially met with "amazement" (to George Bentley 24 July 1894). Her Uncle Charles's letter expresses dislike of women authors in general, but the patrician shudder is aimed at the Bentley firm with whom she would have to deal. As he reminded her on the publication of *Sir Charles Danvers*, "I am, as I always was, very fastidious & jealous of our family name" (Charles Cholmondeely to Mary Cholmondeley, 20 March 1887).

Charles Cholmondeley was not alone in his disparagement of professional authors. As late as 1900, the story "How I Didn't Become An Author" by Norley Chester (Emily Underdown) satirically equates upper-class authorship with "disgracing the family name" (Peterson 2001, 59). When the narrator submits a story to a magazine that her set are likely to read, she forgets to remove her name and her family are horrified. As her sister expresses it, "I thought it was only people like – well, the sort of people one doesn't know, who really wrote and had their names in print" ("How I Didn't Become An Author" 567).

After her death, Percy Lubbock advised readers to "look in the shelves of a country-house library for the novels of Mary Cholmondeley – they are sure to be there." (Lubbock 1927, 50). However as he perceptively noted, "she lived of necessity in the room that was left her, shaped for her, by the hardy growth of the world around her" (ibid., 51). It was a world which "didn't derange itself for the convenience of one young woman who happened to have ideas and ambitions of her own" (ibid. 51). "In particular, the men of her acquaintance "were first in the field, on their own ground" (ibid., 53), and complacent rather than otherwise about the literary ambition of "Mr Cholmondeley's eldest girl" (ibid., 52).

None of these responses, recorded or surmised, suggests a specific concern that a woman author is writing about crime. Interestingly, Cholmondeley herself implicitly rejected the imposition of literary hierarchies - as a reader of both George Eliot and Wilkie Collins, she sought popularity as much as she craved critical acclaim. In *Sir Charles Danvers*, Cholmondeley continued to follow advice

from Richmond Ritchie, and "tried to describe real life, the only life I know, the life of country people", but she feared that it was "so true to nature and consequently dull." (to Richmond Ritchie 5 March [1888]) As she wrote in an article for *Murray's Magazine* in 1889, "Fortunately for those who live in the country, it is not hard to amuse the village mind" ("The Cottager At Home" 245).

Cholmondeley's second novel would testify to her admiration of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. *Sir Charles Danvers* draws on Eliot's novel both in its depiction of a high-minded heroine with philanthropic aims, and in incorporating sensation elements into a story of country life. The novel begins with Charles's inheritance of the title and family estate on the death of his father. It includes stock sensational tropes, including the returned convict and the bigamous marriage. Indeed a major plotline is the heroine Ruth Deyncourt's rash engagement to a man whose previous divorce may not be valid in England. But in an obvious homage to George Eliot, Ruth has only agreed to marry Dare so that he will build model cottages on his neglected estate. While criminal activity serves as a plot catalyst, the interest centres on Ruth's growing attachment to Sir Charles, in the context of her life as a single woman living in the country. Cholmondeley shrewdly pointed out that there was "no resemblance between it and The Danvers Jewels, so that it may disappoint those who liked the sensational element in that story" (to Richmond Ritchie 5 March [1888]). This tension between sensation and the routine of country life resurfaces in several of Cholmondeley's novels.

Like other female authors, Cholmondeley would become adept at incorporating sensational plots into the framework of the realist novel. Her most successful novels, *Diana Tempest* and *Red Pottage*, redeployed sensation tropes in order to emphasise and test the limits of character – a characteristically realist concern. By the 1890s Cholmondeley had learned how to balance her own preoccupation with country life against the exigencies of a sensational story. Her strategy in her most successful novels is to use extreme situations and moral dilemmas as a means of exerting pressure. The key characters emerge from these volatile emotional environments having changed and become more resilient – if they fail the test, they die. *Diana Tempest* is a sensational, proto-New Woman set between London and the Tempest estate of Overleigh Castle. Cholmondeley described the novel as having "more backbone than *Sir Charles*" (to George

Bentley 10 July 1891), but her own measure of literary value is not narrowly based on the privileging of realist over sensational modes. The story itself was inspired by a dinner party anecdote; the realist setting and characters are vital to the inheritance plot, with its related themes of adultery and murder.

Without the release of comedy, Cholmondeley initially struggled to negotiate the competing demands of sensational and realist approaches within the same novel. In answer to Bentley's criticism of the first volume of *Diana Tempest*, she explained somewhat apologetically that her "strong situations" needed the balance of chapters in a "lower key" (to George[?] Bentley 10 July 1891). But the confrontation between these approaches leads ultimately to new insights into the criminal character. Colonel Tempest is a weak man from within the establishment, who has accepted a drunken bet on the succession of the Tempest fortune. He is both self-pitying and an irredeemable spendthrift, as is his son Archie. But he is not inherently murderous or consistently calculating.

Diana Tempest offers a more subtle engagement with *Lady Audley's Secret* than anything attempted in *The Danvers Jewels*. The later novel revisits the trope of the duplicitous beauty, but changes the gender, transferring it to the angelic-looking but heartless Archie Tempest. In a further riff on the Lady Audley theme, Archie really is blonde, but he is killed in a case of mistaken identity. The assassins tracking John Tempest are misled because having just learned of his own illegitimacy, he makes a moral decision and tells them that his name is Fane. So exaggeratedly luscious is Archie's real hair that it never occurs to the men to doubt John's word. As one of them expresses it, "It's the other one in the tow wig, as I said from the first. That ain't real hair. It's the wig as alters him" (*Diana Tempest* 295). In a final moment of irony, this mistake means that the accessory to Archie's murder is his own father, Colonel Tempest.

In one sense *The Danvers Jewels* is hack work. But if the novella itself is superficial, its genesis rebuts critical assumptions about women's amateur approach. By her own account Cholmondeley was working against inclination and through a period of serious illness. Her correspondence with Bentley and other men and women of letters is instructive too, in showing what was possible within the confines of genre writing. The themes in this murderous comedy would be reworked in her major fiction of the 1890s.

The Danvers Jewels anticipates Cholmondeley's later strategy of foregrounding the ordinariness of criminal characters. Sir John is a rebarbative character and a self-confessed murderer, but he is not a stage villain. He is convincing because his ruthlessness is mapped onto petty selfishness and extraordinary rudeness. Carr and Aurelia are deliberately created as near-caricatures to emphasise that they are playing to a credible audience, staging the assumed attributes of Americans interacting with the English upper class.

The Danvers Jewels allowed Cholmondeley, as a young author living in the country, to build a literary network and get a sense of what the market would tolerate. Throughout her career she read widely and actively sought influence from other writers, while positioning herself in relation to a London-based network. While she was unable to take advantage of the new London clubs, her class position offered alternative networking opportunities. Riya Das's argument that "solidarity is a deliberate political choice for women in fin de siècle professional circles" (Das 2024, 27) is suggestive, given Cholmondeley's strategic correspondence with the Ritchies. But she is also able to draw in her immediate circle, using family and relations to gauge audience reaction.

The Danvers Jewels itself was an apprentice work, but as one of her titles, Cholmondeley maintained a professional eye on it for many years. In December 1897 she expressed herself as "delighted" with the gold and white binding of the new edition (although sorry that the dedication to her sister had been omitted). Macmillan signed back the dramatic rights to the work in 1901, although it was never adapted for stage or screen.

15 years earlier Bentley had thanked her for her bright and humorous story. This might seem an odd description for a work that begins with a confession of institutionally sanctioned murder in India, and ends with the escape of another highly plausible killer. But *The Danvers Jewels* shows Cholmondeley experimenting with genre as she learned to negotiate the competing demands of family, her own health and the literary marketplace. As her letters reveal, she was also managing a large household as her mother became increasingly incapacitated, as well as fulfilling the role of "rector's daughter" in an isolated Shropshire hamlet. Under these circumstances, keeping up with developments in the literary metropolis was far from easy. An 1885 caricature by her sister Victoria (later an artist) shows Mary wrestling with multiple irons including "Essays Cornhill" and

"Lending Library" as well as the inevitable "Housekeeping". The caption reads "Too many irons in the fire, Mary". As Cholmondeley herself would have been the first to point out, the one thing she could not afford to lose was her sense of humour.

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'Shadows of Remorse': Guilt and Murder in *Ada the Betrayed*

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the depiction of violence and remorse in the popular penny serial *Ada the Betrayed* (1842-3) – the first serial written by James Malcolm Rymer, who would later write the more famous serials *Varney the Vampire* (1845-7) and *The String of Pearls* (1846-7). It briefly discusses the rise of penny crime fiction in the 1830s, and the depiction of violence and trauma in the penny serials published in the years immediately preceding *Ada,* such as *Oliver Twiss* (1838-9), *Ela, the Outcast* (1839-41), and *The Maniac Father* (1842). It then explores how *Ada* moved away from these in its treatment of the psychology of violence, responding to the moral panic over crime fiction that followed the murder of Lord Russell in 1840, and the role played by the serial in popularising the figure of the remorseful murderer in the popular literary culture of the early Victorian period.

KEYWORDS: Gothic, penny fiction, crime fiction, criminal psychology, trauma.

It is well-known that the culture of early nineteenth-century Britain was marked by an intense interest in violent crime. The period's burgeoning print culture found an ideal source of copy in high-profile murder cases such as the Elstree murder (1823), the Red Barn murder (1827), the Burke and Hare murders (1828), the 'Italian boy' murder (1831), and the Edgeware Road murder (1837), all of which were reported on voluminously in the popular press (Crone 2012, 97-8, 220; Hollingsworth 1963, 29-37). The popular 'Newgate novels' of the 1830s tapped into this same fascination with criminality, sparking much anxiety that lower-class readers might be inspired to emulate the deeds of their criminal protagonists (Breton 2021, 50-1; Crone 2012, 78; Falke 2016, 185-7; Hollingsworth 1963, chapters 4-5).

It was during these same years that publishers such as Edward Lloyd first began to experiment with publishing penny serial fiction (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 1). Much of their content was focussed on crime: indeed, the earliest penny serials were amphibious productions, half crime reportage and half fiction. They initially tended towards matter-of-fact depictions of criminality in the style of the *Newgate Calendar*, but their treatment of criminal violence evolved as the penny press matured. In particular, as I shall discuss, the bestselling penny serial *Ada the Betrayed* (1842-3) marked a milestone in popular depictions of the psychology of violence.

Although the author of *Ada*, James Malcolm Rymer, is better known today as the probable author of *Varney the Vampire* (1845-7) and *The String of Pearls* (1846-7), it was *Ada* that first established his career: so much so that, if George Augustus Sala's later account is to be trusted, 'Ada the Betrayed' became Rymer's nickname among his fellow writers (Sala 1894, 287-8). Lloyd boasted of its "immense popularity", and its success was so great that, in an industry where anonymous and pseudonymous publication was the norm, many of Rymer's later works were published as being 'by the Author of *Ada*' to capitalise on its popularity (Rymer 1847, Preface). Indeed, it is only because they are tagged as being 'by the Author of *Ada*' that many of Rymer's later works can be attributed to him at all (Nesvet 2024, 3; Smith 2019, 50).

Many penny serials were swiftly forgotten once they ceased publication, but in *Household Words* Percy Fitzgerald described seeing a stage adaptation of *Ada* in 1858, demonstrating that its appeal outlasted its original serialisation by at least

fifteen years (Fitzgerald 1858, 550-1). Summarising its plot, Fitzgerald remarked of the villain: "Squire comes into his ill-gotten gains, and, as usual, is preyed upon by remorse" (Fitzgerald 1858, 551). But this 'as usual' should give us pause – for, as I shall discuss, remorseful villains were rare in earlier penny serials. It was only after the success of *Ada the Betrayed* that such figures became stock characters in British popular fiction.

In this article I shall thus discuss *Ada* in relation to its literary and historical contexts, to explore what its success reveals about changing attitudes towards the psychology of violence in the early Victorian period. I shall begin by briefly discussing the rise of penny crime fiction in the 1830s, and the ways in which guilt, crime, and madness were depicted in the early works of Thomas Prest, whose penny serials dominated the marketplace in the years leading up to Rymer's literary debut. I then discuss the immediate cultural contexts within which *Ada* was written, exploring how the moral panic that followed Lord Russell's murder in 1840 combined with changing norms in criminal psychiatry to create a cultural climate favourable to the depiction of criminality as both a cause and a manifestation of insanity. Finally, I examine how *Ada* interprets both "nervous" murderers (who are haunted by guilt) and "brutal" murderers (who care nothing for their crimes) in terms of the abnormal organisation of their respective nervous systems, and argue that the serial's success thus marks the point at which these newly-medicalised understandings of criminal psychology began to manifest themselves in British popular culture, with lasting consequences for subsequent development of crime fiction in Victorian Britain.

1. Between fact and fiction: the rise of the penny serial

Ada appeared at a time when the penny serial was still a new and controversial form, its rise enabled by then-recent innovations in printing, papermaking, and the development of national distribution networks (Hayward 1997, 22). The penny press was born in 1832, with the appearance of *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal, The Penny Magazine,* and *The Saturday Magazine,* all of which were priced at one penny per issue (James 1963, 14-19; Lill and McWilliam 2019, 2-3). Soon afterwards appeared *The Annals of Crime and New Newgate Calendar* (1833), which was sold weekly in eight-page penny instalments. Its title implied that it was a

reprint of the *New Newgate Calendar* (1826-8), but in fact it was an original composition that covered famous crimes right up to the date of publication. Rather than covering each case in 2-3 pages, as had been standard in both *The Newgate Calendar* (1814, 1824) and *The New Newgate Calendar, Annals of Crime* stretched many cases out to the full eight pages, turning them into standalone short stories.

One of the booksellers who distributed *Annals of Crime* was Edward Lloyd, who in 1836 began publishing his own penny crime literature in partnership with the writer Thomas Prest. Prest had already worked on *The Calendar of Horrors!* (1835-6) with George Drake, and his first penny works with Lloyd were notionally non-fiction: *History of the Pirates of All Nations* (1836–37) and *History and Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads and Murderers, Brigands, Pickpockets, Thieves, Banditti and Robbers of Every Description* (1836–37) (James 1963, 25; Crone 2012, 173). Unlike *Annals of Crime,* which dealt only with well-attested historical figures, these crime serials covered a miscellaneous mixture of historical figures, quasi-historical legends, and pure fiction, though they always maintained the pretence that their stories were entirely factual (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 6-7). Lloyd and Prest soon began to supplement these with publications such as *The Penny Play-Book* (1836) and *Tales of the Drama* (1838), which retold the plots of then-popular plays and melodramas as prose narratives, and original works such as *The Gem of Romance* (1836-7) and *Tales of Enchantment* (1836), in which one penny purchased eight pages of fiction accompanied by one woodcut engraving (Smith 2019, 40-1; Léger-St-Jean 2019, 115-17). By 1837 the spread of such serials was sufficiently well-known for Thomas Arnold to object to it in one of his sermons, complaining that the already drug-like and habit-forming qualities of popular literature were made more dangerous by them being published 'so cheap, and at regular intervals' (Hayward 1997, 6-7).

Like *Annals of Crime*, these early penny works were mostly sequences of stand-alone tales, in which individual instalments could be read in any order. Issue 6 of *The Gem of Romance* declared that "We beg to inform our Readers that we shall, in all cases, (where we possibly can) avoid Continuations": this suggests that their stand-alone nature was viewed as an important selling point, with stories stretched across multiple issues as little as possible (Anon 1836, 48). Probably Lloyd assumed there was no guarantee that the working-class reader

who had a penny to spare for an issue today would also have another penny next week for the next one, and that too many "continuations" thus risked alienating readers who could not afford to buy consecutive numbers.

That a market existed for longer-form fiction in penny instalments seems to have been discovered largely by accident. When Dickens attained commercial success with *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), which was sold at the price of one shilling per monthly issue, Prest was quick to undercut him with a weekly *Penny Pickwick* (1837-8). When the *Penny Pickwick* proved successful, Prest followed it with the similarly plagiaristic serials *Oliver Twiss* (1838-9) and *Nickelas Nicklebery* (1838) (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 7-8; Abraham 2019, 98; James 1963, 50-65). The success of these adaptations demonstrated that longer novels could be successfully sold in penny parts, and shortly afterwards Prest began what would become his most famous work: *Ela, the Outcast* (1839-41), a penny serial published in weekly parts, which adapted and massively expanded the then-popular novel *The Gipsey* [sic] *Girl* (1836) by Hannah Maria Jones. *Ela* was the most popular of the early penny serials, and allegedly sold 30,000 copies a week – a huge number for the time (Lill and McWilliam 2019, 13; Smith 2019, 42; James 2019*,* 61-4; James 1963, 26). Prest went on to write many penny serials for Lloyd, but none surpassed *Ela* in popularity (Smith 2019, 50). His subsequent works were advertised as being 'by the author of *Ela'*, and the proliferation of serial heroines in Prest's subsequent works such as *Angelina* (1840-1), *Ernnestine* [sic] *de Lacy* (1840-2), *Emily Fitzormond* (1842), *Gertrude of the Rock* (1842), and *Rosalie, or the Vagrant's Daughter* (1842) testify to his repeated attempts to match *Ela's* unprecedented success.

This was the context in which Rymer began his career as a serial writer. In 1842 he had attempted, unsuccessfully, to launch his own monthly magazine, but after five issues the publication was abandoned and he went to work for Lloyd, beginning a penny serial that ultimately became *Ada the Betrayed* (Smith 2019, 43; Nesvet 2024, 43, 56). As its title implies, *Ada* was written in imitation of *Ela,* and the popularity enjoyed by both suggests that many penny-serial readers must have transferred their allegiances almost seamlessly from *Ela* to *Ada* in 1841-2 (James 2019, 65). However, while both serials told stories filled with violence, madness, and crime, the approaches they took to this material was very different: Prest's focus was firmly on the mental toll that violent crimes took upon their

victims, whereas Rymer's serial demonstrated a new interest in the psychological damage that they might also inflict upon their perpetrators. It is this difference that I shall draw out over the following sections.

2. "My brain is on fire": trauma in the early works of Thomas Prest

As a writer, Prest was fascinated by extreme mental states – a common concern during the period, which witnessed highly public debates over the nature and treatment of insanity in the run-up to the 1845 Lunacy Act (Crawford 2019, 117-22). His key innovation was to incorporate the norms of melodrama into prose fiction: as Louis James notes, "instead of recreating the tone of the novel of feeling, *Ela* is adapted to the conventions of the melodramatic stage" (James 2019, 61). Prest's serials are consequently full of theatrical madmen and madwomen, whose ranting and raging places them in the same 'stage lunatic' tradition as then-popular melodrama characters like 'Crazy Ruth' in George Almar's *The Fire Raiser* (1821) (Crone 2012, 139). Indeed, Almar's Crazy Ruth – who at one point holds off two men with a pair of pistols – may have been an important inspiration for Prest's *Ela,* whose eponymous heroine similarly wields a pair of pistols at two crucial moments in the plot, emphasising the connections drawn by both works between melodramatic madness and deviation from traditional gender roles[1] (Prest 1841, 226, 483-4).

The plot of *Ela* unfolds through a chain reaction of trauma and madness. When Ela is abducted by the aristocratic Edward Wallingford, the shock causes her parents to decline into sickness, madness, and death, while her lover sinks into delirium so severe that "it was a matter of doubt whether he would regain his senses" (Prest 1841, 41, 53). After being seduced by Wallingford, "[Ela's]

[1] Upon drawing her pistols, Almar's 'Crazy Ruth' sings one of her mad songs, as though to emphasise that only madness could drive a woman to such unfeminine behaviour:

> I loaded ye both by the light of the midnight moon!
> I lodged each ball in each barrel fair,
> With caution I lodged them and lodged them with care
> And I said to myself, when next you depart
> Your lodging shall be the false villain's heart.
> But 'tis May-time, I must be merry – Ha! the pole is ungarnished yet, I must away for blue-bell and primrose, I must away[.] (Almar 1828, 36-7)

remorse, her anguish, were so violent that Edward began to be alarmed for her reason", and when he abandons her, she becomes "completely delirious" and attempts suicide (Prest 1841, 37, 48, 57). When Ela reappears, she is carried unconscious into a house, and upon being revived she begins "laughing hysterically", declaiming about "The honeyed poison conveyed by the tongue of treachery […] which rankles at my heart, and scorches up my brain: which has made me what I am!" (Prest 1841, 5-6)

Ela attributes her distress (which makes people "call me madwoman") to Wallingford's betrayal, and when she learns that the woman who saved her is Wallingford's pregnant wife, she seizes her "with a vehemence that made her scream" before jumping out of a window (Prest 1841, 6). Terrified by this encounter, Mrs Wallingford undergoes a mental and physical collapse: the shock "had the most dangerous effect upon her constitution", with the result that "fit had proceeded fit", rendering her "quite delirious" and ultimately causing her to miscarry (Prest 1841, 7, 10, 11, 78). Soon afterwards her daughter apparently dies in a fire, causing Mrs Wallingford to again "become delirious" and decline into "painful aberration of intellect" (Prest 1841, 107, 110). "[W]orn out with care and anxiety" and "fits of delirium", she sinks into "absolute idiocy", and finally dies (Prest 1841, 207, 215, 217, 282). Meanwhile, after being "overcome" with "terrors", her niece Maria finds that "a burning fever seemed to scorch her brain", causing symptoms that include impaired memory and physical illness (Prest 1841*,* 172). Over and over, extreme emotions are depicted as causing grave physical and mental suffering: at one point, the narrator even remarks of another character that "It was wonderful that the violence of the poor old woman's emotions did not cause her immediate death" (Prest 1841*,* 341). Prest went on to use similar storylines in his subsequent penny serial, *The Maniac Father* (1842), in which the disappearance of a daughter once again leads to repeated cases of fever and madness brought on by emotional distress (Prest 1842, 11, 17, 59-61, 95-6, 174-5, 212, 231, 353, 540-1).

However, while Prest was clearly fascinated by the idea that the suffering caused by crimes might drive their victims into madness, he was much less interested in the psychological effects they might have upon their perpetrators. Prest's criminal characters – Rupert Darwin in *Ela,* Adder in *The Maniac Father* – display remarkable psychological resilience, bouncing back from each new

misadventure ready for further acts of villainy, and to the extent that they find themselves "worked up to a pitch of madness" it is mostly by their desire to commit murders rather than their remorse at having already done so (Prest 1841*,* 597). This caused Prest considerable problems when he adapted *Oliver Twist* as *Oliver Twiss,* as the psychological unravelling of Bill Sikes and Fagin under the weight of their guilty consciences constituted some of the most famous parts of Dickens's novel. In *Oliver Twiss* Prest included regular mentions of the "uncomfortable reflections" and "dark imaginings" of his villains after committing murders, but whereas Dickens depicted the guilt of Sikes after killing Nancy as leading directly to his mental disintegration and death, his equivalents in *Oliver Twiss* are simply driven by their mental agonies to commit even more crimes of violence, continuing their criminal careers for hundreds of additional pages ('Bos' 1839*,* 82, 151, 173, 293, 438-9, 453-63, 564-5, 550, 572, 622-4). It was not until Rymer began writing *Ada* that the penny press found an author who shared Dickens's interest in the psychological costs of violent crime.

3. 'Half mad with the mental struggle': *Ada the Betrayed* and the mental costs of violence

Ada was written at a critical moment in the history of British crime fiction. In 1840 Lord William Russell was murdered by his valet, in a crime that was widely attributed to the murderer's reading of *Jack Sheppard* (1840), prompting a moral panic over the supposedly harmful effects of popular crime fiction (Breton 2021, 54; Harman 2019, 46-69, 120-4). As Cassandra Falke has shown, this case prompted concerns that stories of crime might encourage their readers to sympathise with criminals, leading to calls for the authors of such works to demonstrate clearer moral condemnation of the crimes they described (Falke 2016, 188-91).

The early 1840s were also a crucial moment in the history of British psychiatry. In 1835, J.C. Pritchard had popularised the concept of "moral insanity", arguing that extreme indifference to moral norms could be understood as a form of madness, even when it was not attended with traditional symptoms of insanity such as mania or hallucinations (Prichard 1835, 6; Pedlar 2006, 3-4). Such widening definitions of madness contributed to the M'Naghten Rules of

1843[2], which enlarged the grounds upon which criminals could be found not guilty by virtue of insanity, and provided part of the justification for the tremendous expansion of Britain's asylum system (Pedlar 2006, 8; Whitlock 1963, 20; Mellett 1982, 48; Crawford 2019, 117-19). These were also years during which the popularity of phrenology was at its height, with George Combe's *Constitution of Man* (1828) popularising the idea that all forms of mental disorder might have materialist explanations rooted in the abnormal development of the nerves and brain (Cooter 1984, chapter 4; Pedlar 2006, 4-5). Consequently, mental disturbances were increasingly understood in physiological terms, as resulting from various forms of nervous disease, with the working classes seen as being particularly vulnerable to nervous disorders (Logan 1997, chapter 5; Pedlar 2006, 5; Oppenheim 1991, 29, 46-7). One side effect of this was that what Shane McCorristine calls the "hallucination model" of ghost-seeing was rapidly gaining ground at the time, with works such as Buchanan's *Origin and Nature of Ghosts, Demons, and Spectral Illusions* (1840) attributing all seemingly supernatural experiences to malfunctions of the nervous system (McCorristine 2010, 39-49)

Ada the Betrayed can be read as a response to these factors, as Rymer used this materialist model of haunting to show how violent crimes might bring about their own punishment. Its plot revolves around a murder carried out by two men, Jacob Gray and Andrew Britton, at the instigation of a third, Squire Learmont: Learmont is secretly illegitimate, and to secure his inheritance he resolves to murder the legitimate heir, namely Ada's father. The infant Ada survives the murder, and after many adventures she is ultimately restored to her property, while Gray, Britton, and Learmont come to unhappy ends. Because this plot required Ada to grow from infancy to adulthood over the course of the story, its villains were necessarily left in possession of their ill-gotten wealth for many years – but while they may be rich, the serial makes clear that they are anything

[2] The M'Naghten Rules were introduced following the trial of Daniel M'Naghten for the murder of Edward Drummond in 1843, a crime for which M'Naghten was acquitted on grounds of insanity. The M'Naghten Rules redefined the legal test of insanity to mean that "at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong" – a significantly wider definition than had previously applied under British law. For further discussion of these rules, and their impact on British Gothic fiction, see Crawford 2020, 101-11.

but happy. In depicting their sufferings Rymer drew upon the tormented villains of Romantic-era Gothic fiction, as well as the guilt-ridden Shakespearean characters such as Macbeth who served as their original models, and the scenes describing their mental agonies are full of Shakespearean echoes[3] (Rymer 1847, 228, 365). However, while these Gothic and Shakespearean villains were often haunted by actual ghosts, Rymer made clear that the hauntings of his villains were merely hallucinations brought on by their acute psychological distress.

Amidst all his wealth, Learmont finds himself "lonely and desolate" and "half mad with the mental struggle" against his feelings of "deep dejection" and the knowledge that he has "dipped [his] hands in blood" to obtain luxuries he is unable to enjoy (Rymer 1847, 50). He insists that the "shadows of remorse" are merely "born in superstition, and fostered by prejudice" and yet he admits "the silence of this spacious hall has bred and nursed gloomy fancies in my brains":

> "Now, were I weak and superstitious, how well could busy fancy people this large space with grinning gliding shapes, such as haunt ordinary men and drive their weak brains to distraction. I hear yon echo, but I will not be alone. Ha! Ha! 'tis your concave roof that throws back my words. Now if, as I say, I were superstitious—but I am not."

[3] After drinking drugged wine, Gray experiences a nightmare vision which combines two of the most famous hallucination scenes in English literature, Macbeth's vision of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth* Act 3 Scene 4, and Lady Macbeth's vision of Duncan's blood in *Macbeth* Act 5 Scene 1:

> "Don't look at me!" suddenly cried Gray, springing to his feet. "Don't glare at me with your stony eyes! Clear away—clear away. Do you want to stop my breath—I—I—must go—go—from here—there—there—help—save me. What do you do here—one—two—three. Why do you point at me? You would have your deaths. You—you—why do you not remain and rot in the Old Smithy? Save me from him. His wounds are bleeding still. Will the damp earth never soak up all the blood? You, you I shot. Don't grin at me. Away—away—I am going mad—mad—Ada—Ada—Ada—pray—pray for me!" (Rymer 1847, 228)

Later in the novel Rymer draws on the same sources for one of Learmont's guilt-induced frenzies:

> "The blood—blood—the curse of blood! Who whispers that to my heart? I did not do the deed; it was the savage smith; my hands reeked not with the gore. No, no, no. Hence, horrible shadows of the soul, hence, hence—I—I am not, I will not be your victim." (Rymer 1847, 365)

The allusions here are to Macbeth's words to Banquo's ghost ("Thou canst not say I did it – never shake / Thy gory locks at me […] Hence, horrible shadow. Unreal mockery, hence"), Lady Macbeth's words while sleepwalking ("Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.") and Macbeth's words after Duncan's murder ("Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?").

> Even as he spoke, he repeatedly turned to look behind, and it was evident that the guilty man was battling with his fears. (Rymer 1847, 50)

Learmont claims that it is only "superstitious" and "ordinary men" whose "weak brains" lead them to see "grinning gliding shapes" around them, but his glances over his own shoulder strongly suggest that he, too, is seeing things out of the corner of his eye. Later, noting that he has "grown strangely nervous", Learmont complains that "This room seems peopled with shapes", and "There seems in the house to be ever close to me some hideous, unfashioned form, whose hot breath comes on my cheek, and whose perpetual presence is a hell" – experiences that he attributes to "vapours of the brain" (Rymer 1847, 248).

The stage adaptation of *Ada* seen by Fitzgerald included a ghost, but there are no supernatural events in the serial. The closest thing it has to an undead character is Learmont himself, whose "thin and emaciated" body and "dead white" skin give him "a hideous corpse-like appearance" (Rymer 1847, 6). Yet he remains haunted – not by literal spirits, but by manifestations of his own guilt. Significantly, Learmont locates these "gloomy fancies" not in his imagination but in his "brains", implying that the things he sees have physiological causes – presumably due to the cumulative neurological damage inflicted by years of stress, which have reduced him, as his "corpse-like" appearance suggests, to a man more dead than alive.

Learmont is not "superstitious", but his fellow criminal Jacob Gray is. The mental agonies Gray suffers are consequently even worse, as he lives in fear of being haunted by the man he murdered. He believes that seeing this ghost will drive him insane, and he begs Ada to "implore him not to haunt me—not to drive me mad by a glance!" (Rymer 1847, 135). Ada is consequently able to gain power over him by exploiting his fears:

> That power was grounded on the superstition of his character—a weakness which had grown with his crimes, and been increased by the constant pangs of remorse, which even he could not stifle entirely. The solitude likewise, and the constant state of trembling anxiety in which he lived, had shattered his nervous system to that degree that he was indeed a melancholy and warning spectacle of the mental and bodily wreck to which crime is sure to reduce its unhallowed perpetrators. (Rymer 1847, 167)

Even more than Learmont, Gray serves as an emblematic example of the psychological toll that acts of violence take upon "the man of crime". In fearing that his victim's ghost will drive him mad, he has mistaken cause for effect: he is *already* mad with anxiety, and the chief symptom of his madness is his morbid terror of seeing ghosts. Once again, his sufferings are explained in terms of cumulative neurological damage: guilt and fear have exacerbated his "weakness" until his "nervous system" is "shattered". Unlike Learmont, who knows that the ghosts he sees are hallucinations brought on by the "vapours" of his brain, Gray lives in fear of encountering a real ghost, perhaps recalling the tradition that people buried in unhallowed ground, like Ada's murdered father, are most likely to return to haunt the living. Yet it is he himself who is truly "unhallowed", reduced, like Learmont, to a ghostly state of living death by his own "trembling anxiety" and remorse.

Both Learmont and Gray experience their worst mental agonies in sleep, when "the imagination, now freed from the control of reason, conjured up fearful images into the brain of the man of crime" (Rymer 1847, 355). "Well might the man of crime dread to sleep", comments the narrator, as Gray suffers terrible nightmares in which "fancy slept not; but, ever wakeful, conjured up strange ghastly shapes to scare the sleeper" (Rymer 1847, 169). Learmont, meanwhile, is "tortured with frightful dreams, and images of terror flitted before his mental vision" (Rymer 1847, 368). Both experience their dreams as a form of haunting, in which they are pursued by dead men. Gray dreams of being seized and embraced by a "ghastly rotting corpse", while in Learmont's nightmares he flees from "livid spectres, as if fresh from the reeking corruptions of the tomb" (Rymer 1847, 170, 369):

> The flesh hung rag-like upon the yellow moistened bones, and huge drops of green and sickly corruption fell dashing like the preludes of a thunder storm, upon the stairs. Worms and moist things were crawling in and out the sightless eyes—the rattling lips grinned horribly, and amid the havoc of the grave, Learmont could recognise the features of those whom he had driven to death. (Rymer 1847, 369)

This gruesome scene is reminiscent of Romantic-era Gothic fiction: in particular, the description of how "Worms and moist things were crawling in and out the sightless eyes" recalls *The Monk* (1796), where a walking corpse is

introduced with a description of how "The worms, They crept in, and the worms, They crept out, / And sported his eyes and his temples about" (Lewis 1995, 315). These "livid spectres", however, are not actual supernatural beings like those in *The Monk:* they are the products of Learmont's "fanc[y]", and the grotesquerie of their appearance is a measure of the guilt he feels over "those whom he had driven to death". These visions are attributed not to real hauntings but to the physical consequences of the constant stress that both men live with, which induces a "mental fever" in Learmont and causes Gray to suffer "the mad fever of his blood" (Rymer 1847, 364, 170).

Gray and Learmont thus embody the possibility that murder might carry its own punishment with it. The traditional punishment for murder was death, and both men do eventually die as a result of their crimes – but first they suffer mental agonies that turn their lives into a kind of living death, in which they are haunted by ghosts conjured by their "shattered […] nervous system[s]" and the "gloomy fancies in [their] brains". In this they are quite unlike the villains of Prest's earlier serials, who experience such remorse only when dying, and sometimes not even then (Prest 1841, 597-8, 826). But *Ada* did also include a depiction of remorseless criminality in its third villain, Andrew Britton.

4. "Your sealed black heart": the 'hardened' criminal

While Gray and Learmont suffer agonies of guilt, *Ada* makes clear that such responses to violence are not universal: as Learmont complains, "Others have spilt blood as well as I, and they have not been thus haunted" (Rymer 1847, 248). Their fellow murderer, Britton, experiences no such symptoms: a violent drunkard, he is depicted as being indifferent to the harm that he inflicts on others, thus seemingly making him an exception to the narrator's claims about 'the mental and bodily wreck to which crime is sure to reduce its unhallowed perpetrators' (Rymer 1847, 167). Gray himself recognises the difference between them, as he makes clear when Learmont invites him to commit another murder:

> "No, no," said Gray, confused; "I—I cannot—my nerves will not permit me. I really cannot. If you shrink yourself from the deed, why there is Andrew Britton, the savage smith, who revels and rejoices in blood. He will do the deed for you without a murmur."

> "You think then that Britton is the best man I can employ to commit a murder?"
> "I do." (Rymer 1847, 344)

Once again, the narrative offers physical explanations for these psychological differences: the contrast between the terrified Gray and the "savage" Britton is due to the difference in their "nerves". Physically and psychologically ruined by committing one murder, Gray's "nerves" are simply not strong enough for him to commit another – and nor are Learmont's, as is clear from the way that he "shrink[s] from the deed". But Britton is quite another matter, and for him, violence is a source not of guilt, but of "revel[ing] and rejoic[ing]".

Near the end of *Ada*, Britton murders Gray at Learmont's instigation, in a scene of truly shocking violence. Unsurprisingly, Learmont and Britton respond to this episode in very different ways:

> Britton felt himself almost injured that Gray could not be brought to life again in order to give him again the pleasure of dashing Bond's cleaver into his quivering brain.
> But what were these thoughts of the coarse-minded, brutal animal, Britton, in comparison with the whirlwind of frightful feelings that made a hell in the teeming brain of Learmont. If he looked up to the sky, huge gouts of blood seemed to intercept his view of the blue vault of heaven; if he cast his eyes downwards, he could not divest himself of the idea that he was treading in ensanguined pools of human gore. He ground his teeth together till he produced a resemblance of the crashing sound which the cleaver wielded by Britton had made as it came in contact with the crunched bones of Gray's skull. His last despairing cry of "Mercy—mercy—mercy!" was still ringing in his ears; and, finally, such was the intense excitement of his feelings, that he was compelled to lean upon the arm of Britton as he gasped,—
> "I—I—shall go mad—I shall go mad. Andrew Britton, get me some water to cool my brain. I shall go mad!" (Rymer 1847, 423)

Being merely a "brutal animal" – the narrator compares him to "an overgorged reptile" – Britton feels no guilt at Gray's murder: in fact, it gives him so much "pleasure" that he wishes he could do it again (Rymer 1847, 422). Learmont, by contrast, suffers "frightful feelings" and hallucinations until he fears "I shall go mad". Again, this difference in responses is attributed to the

physiological differences between them. Britton's "coarse" mind, which is "half maddened by rage and drink", is not susceptible to remorse, only an animalistic joy in violence, whereas Learmont's sensitive nerves "made a hell in [his] teeming brain" (Rymer 1847, 164, 423).

Britton regards his lack of anxiety as proof that he is sane and healthy, unlike the oversensitive Learmont and Gray. But as the bereaved madwoman Maud points out, his "sealed black heart" may also indicate a form of madness:

> "Peace," cried Britton. "You are mad."
> "Yes, mad—mad," said Maud; "but not so mad as Andrew Britton, for he has murdered—murdered the innocent. There's blood on your hands!"
> Britton started and involuntarily glanced at his hands.
> "Ay blood—blood," cried Maud; "you may wash away the outward stain, but then it clings to your heart; and when you are asked at the last if you are guiltless or not of shedding man's blood, you will hold up your hand, and it will drip with gore!" (Rymer 1847, 159)

It is entirely typical of Britton that he literally checks his hands for bloodstains, rather than understanding Maud's words in a moral or spiritual sense. Learmont and Gray both suffer guilt-induced hallucinations of dripping blood, but Britton never does (Rymer 1847, 228, 365). Maud, however, implies that his indifference to the blood he has shed may itself be a kind of insanity: by rights he *should* feel guilt, and the fact that he does not implies that there may be something even more profoundly wrong with him than with the more obviously symptomatic Gray or Learmont. As Maud tells him, "There is nothing in nature so dark and terrible as thy heart" (Rymer 1847, 160).

Ada thus offers two distinct models of criminal psychology: the "nervous" murderer, for whom committing murder is a tremendous trauma that brings with it a lifetime of physical and mental ill-health, and the "brutal" murderer, for whom murder is a matter of indifference. Crucially, however, it suggests that the latter *may also be a form of madness* (or perhaps "moral insanity"), resulting from the abnormal coarseness of the murderer's nerves and brain, which renders them unable to comprehend the moral weight of their own crimes. The descriptions of Britton as "savage", "brutal", and an "animal" repeatedly position him as

something less than fully human – a model which Rymer returned to three years later when describing his most famous penny-serial villain, Sweeney Todd.

5. Conclusion: *Ada the Betrayed* and the psychology of murder

As I have discussed, *Ada the Betrayed* was published at a moment when both haunting and criminality were increasingly coming to be understood in physiological terms, as forms of madness resulting from nervous disease. With its emphasis on the relationship between criminality and madness, and on the toll that violent crimes took upon the nerves and brains of their perpetrators, *Ada the Betrayed* might be taken as marking the point at which these ideas began to percolate down to the level of popular culture. Whereas Prest's earlier serials had mostly remained true to the old *Newgate Calendar* tradition, in which madness was something that happened to victims rather than criminals and murderers seldom expressed remorse unless they were caught, Rymer had moved with the times, expressing a new fascination with the anguished psychology of violence and guilt. This cultural shift was neatly captured by Dickens in *Oliver Twist,* in a scene where Fagin gives Oliver a Newgate Calendar:

> He turned over the leaves. Carelessly at first; but, lighting on a passage which attracted his attention, he soon became intent upon the volume. It was a history of the lives and trials of great criminals; and the pages were soiled and thumbed with use. Here, he read of dreadful crimes that made the blood run cold; of secret murders that had been committed by the lonely wayside; of bodies hidden from the eye of man in deep pits and wells: which would not keep them down, deep as they were, but had yielded them up at last, after many years, and so maddened the murderers with the sight, that in their horror they had confessed their guilt, and yelled for the gibbet to end their agony. Here, too, he read of men who, lying in their beds at dead of night, had been tempted (so they said) and led on, by their own bad thoughts, to such dreadful bloodshed as it made the flesh creep, and the limbs quail, to think of. The terrible descriptions were so real and vivid, that the sallow pages seemed to turn red with gore; and the words upon them, to be sounded in his ears, as if they were whispered, in hollow murmurs, by the spirits of the dead. (Dickens 1966, 196-7)

Fagin gives Oliver this book because he hopes it will inspire him with a love of crime: the same effect that it seems to have had upon his other boys, who view the Calendar as bestowing a glamorous immortality upon the criminals it describes, and are consequently distraught by the idea that the Artful Dodger may never grace its pages. ("Nobody will never know half of what he was. How will he stand in the Newgate Calendar?") (Dickens 1966, 390). But Oliver is a boy of the new generation, and what strikes him is not the glamour of these violent crimes but the way they "maddened the murderers" until death seemed preferable to their mental "agony" – an idea which takes hold of Oliver's imagination so forcefully that he, like the murderers he reads about, begins to feel that he is haunted "by the spirits of the dead". Prest had no interest in such themes, and when he adapted *Oliver Twist* as *Oliver Twiss* he left this scene out entirely. In *Ada the Betrayed,* however, Rymer seems to have taken these ideas and made them foundational to his plot.

As I have discussed, this decision must be understood in relation to the moral panic over popular crime fiction that took hold of Britain in the 1840s. It was very much a sign of the times that when the 1843 volume of *Lloyd's Penny Weekly Miscellany* was collected for publication, Lloyd added a preface emphasising that *Ada the Betrayed* had been written with a firm moral purpose, and was consequently more likely to discourage crimes than to inspire them:

> We shall make it our study to maintain the high majesty of virtue over the turbulence of vice, and to make our pages, while they glow with the romantic and the chivalrous, so replete with true nobility of sentiment, that we shall, as hitherto, find our way, and maintain our place, among the young and pure of heart. (Lloyd 1843, iii)

When *Ada* was collected in a single volume, its new preface further emphasised its moral and educational character:

> The working of retribution upon the guilty, the self-congratulation and ennoblement of mind which always accompany a good action, and the degradation and misery to which vice subjects its possessor, have all been delineated in a natural manner.
> With these few observations, the work is left in the hand of the reader for his attentive perusal. (Rymer 1847, Preface)

Rob Breton has noted the lack of any serious engagement with politics in *Ada,* even though it appeared during a period of intense Chartist activism (Breton 2021, 118-20). In this context, the serial's heavy emphasis on the miseries entailed in violent crime can be understood as another way in which *Ada* signalled its own social harmlessness. Unlike *Ela, the Outcast* or *Jack Sheppard, Ada* repeatedly emphasised that indulging in "the turbulence of vice" leads "in a natural manner" to "degradation and misery". "The working of retribution upon the guilty" is manifested not through the justice of the state – none of its three villains are ever tried for their murders – but through the psychological costs of violence, which ultimately lead all three men to destruction. The result is a work which invites its readers, like Oliver Twist with his Newgate Calendar, to focus more upon the mental anguish of the criminal than upon the excitement of their violent crimes.

Britton, Learmont, and Gray are murderers, but they are hardly glamorous figures: Britton is portrayed as animalistic and barely human, while Learmont and Gray are so tormented by guilt that their lives dwindle into a form of living death. Writing in the immediate aftermath of Lord Russell's murder, Rymer may well have written them in this way precisely so that he could claim to have "maintain[ed] the high majesty of virtue", making his novel less likely to corrupt "the young and pure of heart". But in the process he also introduced into the penny crime serial a new focus on the psychological costs of murder, with such effectiveness that fifteen years later Fitzgerald could watch a stage adaptation of *Ada* and remark, quite casually: "Squire comes into his ill-gotten gains, and, as usual, is preyed upon by remorse" (Fitzgerald 1858, 551).

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REVIEWS

Enrico Fink,

Patrilineare. Una storia di fantasmi. Torino: Lindau, 2025.

"Vorrei imparare a vivere".[1] Così ha inizio *Spettri di Marx*, il saggio che il filosofo Jacques Derrida scrisse nel 1993, dopo la caduta del muro di Berlino. Il libro prosegue con queste parole: "Vivere, per definizione, non si impara. Non da soli, dalla vita attraverso la vita. Solo dall'altro e attraverso la morte."[2] Il paradigma derridiano della spettralità si presta ad analisi politiche e psicologiche, in sintonia con quell'interesse postmoderno per trauma, amnesia, memoria e postmemoria che al volgere del millennio si è tradotto in una pluralità di narrazioni.

Una cultura della memoria cui abbiamo affidato il compito di costruire un mondo migliore. Anche se ancora non ci siamo. Anche se il ricordo sembra in ultimo non bastare. Ma la necessità di mantenere viva la memoria continua a imporsi: la necessità d'interrogarci sulla vita a contatto con l'altro in ogni sua forma. E in ogni morte.

Il desiderio di imparare a vivere torna urgente in un libro fortemente abitato da spettri, fin dal titolo: *Patrilineare. Una storia di fantasmi* – un oggetto narrativo non identificato che Enrico Fink ha regalato al pubblico all'inizio del 2025. Un memoir personale e famigliare. Un romanzo. Tutto questo e di più.

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx. L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, Paris, Galilée, 1993, p. 13. Traduzione mia.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 14. Traduzione mia.

Patrilineare non si lascia definire con facilità, non si lascia circoscrivere. È il racconto di un'esperienza tanto sincera e toccante nella sua nudità quanto è ricco e complesso il suo tessuto stilistico. Per tracciare il suo percorso personale Fink veste gli abiti del vero romanziere, raccontandoci per pagine intere la storia di un sasso, adottando a tratti il punto di vista di una telecamera, e perfino proiettando i lettori sulla Luna, a contatto con uno dei rover lì abbandonati dopo le missioni spaziali delle varie sonde Apollo.

Eppure il libro è la storia di Elias, che si avvicina all'ebraismo in età adulta per un'esigenza maturata a contatto con l'ombra, che si tratti dell'ombra di un *dybbuk* – "lo spirito di una persona morta anzi tempo che resta nel mondo e possiede il corpo di un vivente" (347) – o di un più famigliare fantasma freudiano, col suo corredo di conflitti edipici e sensi di colpa.

L'essere figlio di *padre* ebreo si traduce per Elias in una condizione liminale, visto che l'appartenenza ebraica è matrilineare, e per di più Elias è stato allevato in un ambiente laico, anche se la nonna paterna fin da bambino gli ha trasmesso frammenti di memorie introdotti da un semplice modo di dire. Solo un richiamo all'attenzione, che cela un più profondo imperativo narrativo: quel *Devi sapere* con cui iniziano per il piccolo Elias le storie di vita di chi lo ha preceduto.

Non arriviamo subito al cuore di queste storie. Il libro ripetutamente spiazza, e lo fa con mestiere, con colta e scaltra indifferenza a ogni economia narrativa. Prima che quel *Devi sapere* abbracci appieno anche noi lettori, ci troviamo a fare cose che mai avremmo immaginato. Condividere il cubo di una discoteca con Elias – sensibile flautista che nel vagheggiare futuri concerti si presta, per pagare l'affitto, a eventi disco dance – e l'eroticissima Lovejoy, nata su Venere (a quanto lei stessa racconta) il giorno di San Valentino. Oppure correre contromano a gran velocità sulla Porsche nera guidata da John (tutto abbigliato in pelle e con un gran cappello texano, ma il cui vero nome è Giovanni Paolo, in omaggio al defunto Papa) mentre una fila interminabile di auto punta al parcheggio del Cyborg, la discoteca di punta del nord est padano.

Facendo del suo protagonista uno *schlemiel*, un picaro postmoderno in cerca di fortuna musicale, il libro ci cattura a nostra insaputa finché il gioco è fatto. La narrazione è ormai prepotente nella sua presa. Non tollera abbandoni né dilazioni.

Sa scrivere questo Enrico Fink! Non solo un romanzo, ma al suo interno cento brevi racconti, che non ti danno il tempo di stancarti. La vicenda di Gianfranco e dei suoi gatti. La scoperta della casa di Via Mazzini. I viaggi in elicottero dell'Ingegner Prampolini… Perfino le traversie pornosplatter del protagonista! La narrazione è digressiva eppure memorabile. In questo sta il segreto della scrittura di Fink, la sua maestria. In un metodo che è oltre ogni metodo.

Attraverso una panoplia di registri, il libro diverte e commuove, mostrandoci il mondo come non lo abbiamo ancora visto, alternando momenti di fantateatro comico a episodi di affettiva intimità, finché arriviamo al nucleo della narrazione: quel luogo e quel tempo da cui in ultimo l'ombra trae la sua oscurità e la sua urgenza.

Siamo a Ferrara, all'epoca della strage fascista meglio nota come la lunga notte del '43. Nel cuore della comunità ebraica, che nella Scuola tedesca di via Mazzini (così si chiama la sinagoga più frequentata) trova il punto d'incontro, il fulcro della propria identità.

Siamo in un mondo in cui il piccolo Guido, cresciuto all'ombra di leggi razziali di cui non comprende la portata, si reca ogni mattina nella scuola ebraica di Via Vignatagliata, talvolta inseguito da male intenzionati coetanei.

È la Ferrara dei *Finzi Contini* e di Giorgio Bassani, di cui è lontana parente – nella realtà quanto nel romanzo – Laura Bassani, la mamma di Guido, il cui papà è Isidoro Fink, nato da ebrei di origine russa trasferitisi a Gorizia per sfuggire ai pogrom. E a Ferrara vivono nel '43 anche i genitori di Isidoro, immigrati dall'accento ancora straniero il cui tragitto dall'impero russo a quello austro ungarico all'Italia è sotto il segno di una perpetua diaspora, mentre le radici ebraiche della famiglia di Laura affondano solide nella Ferrara rinascimentale.

Contribuiscono i dettagli a proiettarci in un mondo la cui spoglia umanità è spesso resa con un sorriso, come quando Guido, in un quaderno, racconta del regalo che gli ha portato il nonno paterno: "'Il pacchetto era così bello e colorato, l'ho scartato facendo una festa felice. Ma dentro c'era solo una mela cotta"' (230).

Leggiamo di tutto questo tutto d'un fiato. Dei rastrellamenti, delle follie del regime, delle fughe in campagna, dei tradimenti, delle deportazioni e del destino di chi resta.

Il libro attraversa la fitta oscurità di un tempo in cui le bombe americane vengono salutate come il vento di morte che allontana il fascismo, in cui la speranza è sempre in bilico, in cui la fame dà il braccio alla paura.

Non temano le future lettrici e i futuri lettori. In queste pagine la memoria non è monocorde, non è penitenziale, non è retorica. Il libro è bellissimo e pieno di luce, da cui l'ombra – questo è vero – esce ancora più buia.

Frutto di una consapevolezza maturata nel corso degli anni attraverso un itinerario (a tratti doloroso, forse ascetico?) di scoperta degli altri e di sé, *Patrilineare* è raccontato con autoironia e comicità, senza compiacimento, con semplicità di cuore e dovizia di strumenti narrativi. Questa storia di fantasmi attinge a un ampio scaffale di letture, compresa la grande tradizione del romanzo ebraico-americano, e per di più – con un 'patrilineare' omaggio alle passioni gemelle di Guido Fink, critico letterario e cinematografico che tanti ricordano per il suo genio e le sue doti di docente – ibrida felicemente il linguaggio del romanzo con quello del cinema.

Più di ogni altra cosa, il libro è scritto con una grande, vera attenzione all'umano. Meritatissima, dunque, la menzione speciale che ha ottenuto nella trentasettesima edizione del Premio Calvino. E altrettanto meritato il tempo che il pubblico dei lettori vorrà dedicargli.

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Camilla Caporicci (edited by),

The Song of Songs in European Poetry (Twelfth to Seventeenth Centuries): Translations, Appropriations, Rewritings. Turnhout: Brepols, The Medieval Translator 21, 2024.

"The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (Song 1:1): this opening formula, reminiscent of the ascriptions to David in the Psalms, constitutes the only conventional statement in a biblical text that otherwise defies precedent. The verse is immediately followed by an outburst of erotic longing, which sets the tenor for a work that foregrounds corporeal desire with an intensity unmatched in Scripture: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine" (Song 1:2). Does this fervent love relate to God? This has remained the central question for generations of readers and exegetes. For the two lovers never explicitly name God. Yet, perhaps precisely due to its unabashed sensuality, the Song of Songs has been one of the most enticing readings among the biblical books, playing an essential role in shaping medieval and Renaissance European spirituality. Over time, Jewish and Christian interpreters have preserved this exceptionally ambivalent book in their respective canons by allegorising it as a meditation on the relationship between divine and human love. From early rabbinic exegetes reading Israel (or the individual soul) as God's covenantal Spouse to medieval Christian conceptualisations of the Church's or the soul's marriage with Christ, and further through Marian devotion to ecstatic mysticism, the Song has been reframed as "a triumph of allegory, the eroticism of the text not erased, but re-semanticized as a sign of something else" (p. 13). Emerging early on, these diverse allegorical interpretations transformed the biblical book into a model for devotional expression. The Song of Songs thus stands as one of the most fascinating paradoxes in the history of biblical reception: a lyrical and passionate celebration of love that, across centuries, has served as a vehicle for articulating the profound mystery of spiritual union and sacred eros.

Scholarly fascination with the many allegorical interpretations and appropriations of the Song of Solomon in the medieval and early modern period long diverted attention away from the influence of the biblical book in the rise and development of European poetic culture. Recent scholarship by Ann W. Astell (1990), E. Ann Matter (1992), Rosanna Guglielmetti (2008), Monica Barsi and Alessandra Preda (2016), Noam Flinker (2000) has begun to redress this,

bringing to light the dynamics through which the Song has permeated the literary and cultural fabric of Europe. While these studies have unveiled much about the medieval and early modern reception of the Song, they have only briefly addressed its poetic resonances or have privileged its exegetical and homiletic traditions. In this context, Camilla Caporicci's study emerges as both timely and pioneering. Her edited collection fills an important scholarly lacuna, offering the first comprehensive investigation of the biblical book as a vital intertext in vernacular and Latin poetry between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries.

This volume, developed from a 2020 conference at the University of Padua, forms part of Caporicci's broader research project for the reappraisal of the Song's role in the European tradition of love lyric – a project whose major findings have been recently published in her monograph with Oxford University Press (2025). Arranged into three main sections, the collection contains essays by fourteen contributors from a variety of academic fields and backgrounds. The reader is thus invited to reflect on the intricate process of the Song's appropriations and rewritings from the perspectives of biblical reception, comparative literature, literary criticism, musicology, translation studies, philology, and linguistics. Moreover, the collection spans a diverse geographical scope, favouring the appreciation of the phenomenon across confessional and linguistic disciplinary boundaries. Its commendable coherence is grounded in its thematic focus and the well-thought-through structure, which facilitates the reader's grasp of the material's historical evolution.

The methodological diversity is one of the book's greatest strengths as it also allows for addressing the longstanding but problematic distinction between sacred and secular poetry. While this dichotomy is increasingly seen as misleading, it cannot be utterly dismissed, especially in medieval contexts, where spiritual and secular discourses often intersect in complex ways. Few biblical texts have inspired such sustained poetic engagement in major devotional and religious medieval works. It is not surprising, then, that the four essays of the first section, 'A Many-faced Influence: Medieval Voices', examine the multifaceted contexts in which the lyric appropriations of the Song of Songs fostered this exceptional convergence of sacred and secular codes. Leor Jacobi outlines the Song's lore in Hebrew liturgical poetry, pointing out its peculiar interpretation in the fifth-century Ashkenazi poem, *Shir HaShirim Amareha Sefe*. The author of the *piyyut*

transforms the profane love text into an interpretative space, where the feminised Song (despite the masculinity of the term) turns into a nourishing mother and the Sages are the breasts, mediating the "scholarly act of 'expressing milk' from the Song of Songs" (p. 42). The text's remarkable fluidity and tension between devotional and secular love are further developed in the following chapters. Greti Dinkova-Bruun examines three particular verse engagements with the *Cantica canticorum* – namely, Riga's own versification, Aegidius of Paris's revision of it, and an anonymous poem called *Cantica canticorum Beate Virginis* – to prove the uniqueness of Peter Riga's *Aurora* on two levels. On the one hand, the generative power of Riga's composition transforms the biblical text into a highly poetic reality "both profound theologically and intricate stylistically" (p. 51); on the other hand, the *Aurora*'s great capacity to inspire imitations and adaptations is seen precisely in the Song of Songs's intersection between erotic passion and spiritual love. Moving beyond traditional allegory, Brindusa Grigoriu's chapter analyses the Song's textual reminiscences in early Tristan and Ysolt romances, including Béroul's version of the legend, Thomas of Britain's poem, *The Folie of Berne*, Marie de France's *Chevrefoil*, and Eilhart of Oberg's adaptation. Grigoriu examines the episode of Tristan's amorous death, where the hero becomes a tree amid the arboreal landscape of the world-garden, assuming the role of the mystical Bridegroom from the Song of Songs. United with his feminine, flower-like counterpart, he comes to embody the triumph of a love-death "viriditas" (p. 60) through which the two lovers are eternally joined. This first section concludes with Christiania Whitehead and Denis Renevey's chapter focusing on the fourteenth-century Middle English mystic Richard Rolle, whose writing was deeply influenced by the Song of Songs. As Reveney argues, the impact of the biblical poem "is not only literary, accounting for the intense lyricism and musicality of *Melos* [*amoris*], its imagery, and its metaphors; in addition it also contributes the building blocks of Rolle's contemplative system" (p. 90). In particular, Reveney maintains that Rolle's contemplative sensorium, consisting of the fusion of bodily and inner sense perceptions, evolved directly from his engagement with the Song of Songs. Christiania Whitehead, in turn, explores the reproduction of Rolle's lyrics in the fifteenth century and his mediation on angelic song. Whitehead's analysis of the anonymous religious lyrics is finely

informed by their accompanying illustrations, which changed the resonances of these lyrics.

The transmission of the Song of Songs and its intertextual relationship with other works appears highly problematic since the book circulated in multiple genres and forms. This dynamic is particularly evident in the essays constituting the second section, where the dialogue between poetry and music in Italian medieval and early modern contexts comes to light ('Poetry and Music: the Italian Tradition'). Lino Pertile's finely argued essay shows how the Song's imagery of the wound of love and the marriage of the Cross is reinterpreted as an interdiscursive phenomenon in the popular piety tradition of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy. Pertile turns to Dante's *Purgatorio* to reveal how the concept of 'buon dolor' (good sorrow) – a thirst for suffering which perfects the penitents' souls and brings them closer to God – "would not be possible without the Song of Songs and the immense riches of its commentary" (p. 108). This textual entanglement persists into the Renaissance as it appears in the following chapters. Matteo Navone's contribution offers a reassessment of Petrarchism's complex relationship to biblical language, and especially how both minor and famous sixteenth-century Italian poets, such as Pollastrino, Girolamo Malipiero, Bernardo and Torquato Tasso – though not overtly invoking the Song – nevertheless revived their spiritual lyricism with a language close to that of the Song's love poetry. The conflation of corporeal and mystical languages also features in the last two chapters of the section, which focus on the significant influence of the biblical book on Italian early modern musical production. Marina Toffetti's broad survey of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century musical settings of the Song reveals the extent to which composers drew upon its lyrical intensity not merely for textual content but as "a privileged catalyst for certain traits of the spiritual and aesthetic sensibility" (p. 161). Gabriele Taschetti's analysis centres on a collection of motets, *Symbolae diversorum musicorum*, compiled by Lorenzo Calvi (Venice, 1621). The collection deserves attention since a quarter of it is dedicated to the Song of Songs. Taschetti unpacks the different textual approaches and the editorial strategies behind this rich repertoire of Song-based motets. Both essays eloquently attest to the power of music as a parallel – and often privileged – hermeneutic mode for the Song.

The English translations and appropriations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the subject of the third and final section, 'Rewriting and Appropriating the Song of Songs in the British Isles'. Echoing earlier patterns, the Song of the Songs here again serves as a bridge between sacred and secular discourses. Its fusion of sensual and devotional imagery allowed it to influence a wide spectrum of poetry, making it common for texts to be both religious and amorous or, at least, to exhibit a polysemic richness rooted in its language. Of course, the Reformation added complexity by prompting vernacular translations of the Bible, including the Song, and further multiplying the variety of possible source texts – verse paraphrases, exegetical and liturgical texts, sermons, hymns, and prayer books. In this light, the first three chapters might be read through the lens of cultural acquisition and the different strategies of lexical and conceptual amplification, domestication and defamiliarisation behind poetic and prose borrowings. Fabio Ciambella's study of early English Bible translations, from Coverdale to the King James version, combines a corpus-based lexical analysis with theological sensitivity to reveal how each translator adopted different styles and priorities at a time "when multiple source texts were available and considered equally important" (p. 203). Rachel Stenner's compelling reading of William Baldwin's *Canticles* (1549) positions it as a liminal text between scriptural paraphrase and a precursor of Petrarchian lyric, inviting the reader to reconsider the development of Petrarchism in England. By voicing female desire, Baldwin unsettles the assumptions about gender and voice that defined the English tradition of love lyric. The result, concludes Stenner, "is a biblical paraphrase fashioned as English love poetry", manifesting "an experimental conjunction of secular and devotional writing" (p. 222). Tibor Fabiny's attentive close reading of Joseph Hall's 1609 verse paraphrase of the Song of Songs presents it as a highly poetic commentary (compared to some of the greatest poems of the period) and a very complicated text, enlarging on the biblical source text to express the author's artistic, political and theological intentions. Rediscovering Hall's forgotten commentary "can help us broaden our knowledge of the poetic and religious imagination of the seventeenth century" (p. 235).

The concluding chapters of this section reveal the role of the Song of Solomon in the intricate religious and political situation of seventeenth-century England, to bear witness to either one's faith or one's religious dissent. Carmen

Gallo's chapter is devoted to George Herbert, one of the major representatives of metaphysical poetry. Gallo discusses Herbert's reshaping of the Song of Songs, particularly the image of the banquet, in *The Temple* (1633) "as a way of representing a sacramental experience that mingles spiritual and sensual dimensions to respond to the theological controversies of his time on Christ's Real Presence" (p. 238). As for the influence of the Song on religious dissent, Simone Turco addresses the ambivalent attitude toward the biblical source of some Ranter thinkers during the Puritan Revolution. While recognising the Song as a possible vehicle of sensuality, they fail to unify the erotic language and imagery of the source with their religious principles to affirm their libertarian views. In the context of significant repression, Adrian Streete closes this section with the poetic engagement of a number of English women prophets in the seventeenth century, drawing upon the Song of Songs as a powerful means of asserting their spiritual and social authority. Streete focuses on the writings of Anna Trapnel, Katherine Sutton, Anne Wentworth, and Dorothy White, offering an interpretive lens that situates their use of the Song within a triadic framework: theological, political, and domestic. Streete concludes with a few reflections on the broader use of the Song by other religious sects and considers the fate of its prophetic resonances in the later decades of the seventeenth century.

Caporicci's volume not only reaffirms the enduring vibrancy of the Song of Songs *as* and *in* literature, but also makes a vital contribution to a long-overlooked area in the study of biblical reception across medieval and early modern Europe. Impressively ambitious in scope yet lucid in structure, this essay collection navigates the Song's multifarious poetic afterlives with clarity, originality, and scholarly finesse. Through an approach that combines precise close readings with exceptional methodological vivacity, Caporicci's book offers a much-needed reappraisal of the importance of the Song of Songs for European culture. What emerges is a conceptually layered portrait of this scriptural work as a text that continually renews itself through dialogue with theology, philosophy, aesthetics, and music across an array of literary forms and genres. At the same time, the volume's multidisciplinary acumen guides the reader to a major awareness that the reception history of the Song of Songs is an elusive and hidden phenomenon. The volume also gestures (albeit briefly) towards the material transmission of the Song, hinting at the fertile potential of further enquiry into its manuscript

and print histories. Above all, the study succeeds in demonstrating how the biblical poem served as a complex and veiled paradigm within European literary imagination. It will undoubtedly remain a touchstone for scholars working at the intersection of biblical reception, poetics, and cultural history. More broadly, it promises to reshape future conversations about the history of the Song of Songs and its role in defining religious and literary culture.

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Camilla Caporicci, Fabio Ciambella, and Cristiano Ragni (edited by),

Richard Barnfield's Poetics: Early Modern English Poetry Beyond Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury/The Arden Shakespeare, 2025.

Richard Barnfield (1574-1620) occupies a curious space in the literary history of early modern England. At once marginal and seminal, boldly innovative yet long neglected, Barnfield is a writer whose poems have been overshadowed by the very authors with whom he was once confidently ranked. This conditioned fame is all the more striking given his meteoric career, for he appears to have written and published poetry only between 1594 and 1598, with a second edition of *Lady Pecunia* issued in 1605. Until quite recently, he was remembered simply because two of his poems were long attributed to Shakespeare (the sonnet "If music and sweet poetry agree" and the beautiful ode "As it fell upon a day" occasionally set to music) and were included in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599). Yet, this poet who admired Spenser but who strongly engaged with Marlowe and especially Shakespeare, who has Apollo behaving like a besotted teenager, calling Cassandra "my Cass" (1595, D5*v*), and who deliberately mixes thrilling eroticism with bathetic expressions, is extremely interesting. *Richard Barnfield's Poetics: Early Modern English Poetry Beyond Shakespeare*, edited by Camilla Caporicci, Fabio Ciambella, and Cristiano Ragni, is the first scholarly volume to take Barnfield's entire poetic corpus seriously as a site of aesthetic, historical, and cultural enquiry. It is also the only edited collection designed expressly for the occasion of Barnfield's 450th anniversary, and it positions itself as a major reappraisal set to influence future understandings of Barnfield's poetics, also considering that the most recent critical edition, by George Klawitter, dates back to 1990.

The editors' Introduction alongside Robert Stagg's Prelude lay out the case for Barnfield's renewed critical attention and provides a biographical and bibliographical overview that serves as a foundation for the volume's aims. They remind readers that Barnfield's career, though brief — his printed works appearing between 1594 and 1598 — was marked by experimentation across genres including pastoral, Petrarchan lyric, epyllion, and mock-encomium. They also acknowledge the long history of discomfort with Barnfield's bold homoeroticism, which until recently often resulted in either moralising condemnation (consider Thomas Warton's choice of terms when discussing

"allusions of an equivocal tendency" in the poems; 1871, 440) or sanitising mischaracterisation (including, for instance, insistence that his love poetry was homoerotic only in a juvenile and chastely Neoplatonic way). This "*Brigadoon* of early modern writers", as Will Tosh playfully calls him in the Afterword (281), has begun to be hailed – at times rather naively – as the first English poet to openly celebrate gay love, and he has also been invoked in earlier criticism as evidence in debates about artistic degeneracy. For instance, drawing on Havelock Ellis, Mario Masini claimed that Barnfield was publicly accused of sodomy and consequently imprisoned during his lifetime (an event that, in fact, never occurred; 1915, 272). The editors frame the volume as an attempt both to consolidate and to expand the rapidly developing scholarship on Barnfield, whose works have gained significant attention as key documents in queer literary history and as complex participants in wider Elizabethan poetic practices. This triadic focus, that is, queer studies, intertextual/genre studies, and stylistics, structures the collection's four sections.

The first section, "Barnfield's (Re)sources", addresses Barnfield's relationship to his classical and contemporary sources, emphasising Barnfield's learned conversation with classical antiquity, with Petrarchism, and with broader cultural resources (see Drakakis 2021) in early modern literary memory. The section opens with Massimiliano Rivera's "Barnfield at Grammar School: Orpheus's 'sad teares' and the Rhetoric of *Pathos*". It is an essay on one of the least known of Barnfield's compositions, *Orpheus, His Journey to Hell* and it offers one of the most original arguments in the volume. Noting Barnfield's exceptional faithfulness to the Orpheus and Eurydice passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Riviera contends that Barnfield's adaptation does not merely function as humanist rewriting but as a critique of sixteenth-century rhetorical pedagogy. Riviera reads the poem as an epyllion, belonging, like most specimens of the genre, to that group of "poems that behave badly" (32). By tracing Barnfield's parodic manipulation of Quintilian, Riviera shows how *Orpheus* becomes a wry commentary on the overvaluation of *actio* and pathos in Elizabethan grammar school training. This claim helps reframe Barnfield not as derivative but as subtly oppositional to humanist normativity. Cristiano Ragni's chapter addresses *The Legend of Cassandra*, perhaps the most consistently neglected work in Barnfield's corpus. Ragni outlines the difficulty of identifying direct sources for the poem

but persuasively argues for Barnfield's engagement with compendia such as Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (rather than directly drawing on Aeschylus). More importantly, he situates Barnfield's treatment of Cassandra — at turns petty, passionate, prophetic, and politically charged — within the 'minor epic' tradition and the generic conventions of complaint and panegyric. Ragni's strongest claim is that Barnfield deliberately renders Cassandra's character in ways that avoid politically dangerous associations with Queen Elizabeth I. The first section ends with Shawn Smith's essay on Barnfield's Petrarchan inheritance. He argues that Barnfield engages not only with the surface conventions of Petrarchan but also with Petrarch's deeper philosophical tensions regarding the legitimacy of erotic desire. With sensitivity to both the *Canzoniere* and its English tradition, Smith claims Barnfield ultimately rejects Petrarchan narcissism, opting instead for a homoerotic Petrarchism that acknowledges its own marginality and challenges the laureate paradigm. This argument resonates strongly with queer theory by suggesting that Barnfield's Petrarchism is simultaneously imitative and resistant, a hybrid mode that reorients erotic authority away from heteronormative structures. Smith highlights the poet's "ability not only to validate homoerotic sexual desire […] to celebrate the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the human experience not only of sex but of love" (87).

The second section, "Barnfield and His Contemporaries", examines Barnfield's embeddedness in the networks – social, poetic, and ideological – of the 1590s. Andrew Hadfield's chapter ("Richard Barnfield: Patronage, Intimacy, and Money") is a necessary corrective to Barnfield's reception as primarily a queer poet, reminding readers that financial need and patronage politics were central pressures for all Elizabethan writers and even goes so far as to state that "Few poets have been more open than Richard Barnfield about their frustrations with the need to secure support from the rich and powerful" (96). He was not an entirely steadfast member of any literary circle and *Lady Pecunia* and *The Complaint of Poetry* emerge as sharp critiques of the emerging monetisation of literary culture. And yet, Hadfield sensibly acknowledges that Barnfield's critique of money is ambiguous since "it is hard to know how far-reaching some his ideas/criticism really were" (109).

Evgeniia Ganberg's chapter ("The Female Gaze? Seeing, Seeming, and Being Seen in Barnfield, Powell, and Shakespeare") nicely complements Ragni's essay and offers a comparative study of visuality in Barnfield, Shakespeare, and Thomas Powell (the author of the rather obscure poem *Love's Leprosy*). Ganberg argues that Barnfield subverts conventional gendered dynamics of seeing by giving Cassandra a visual agency that overpowers Apollo's divine gaze, an agent rather than a passive object of desire. Tania Demetriou's masterful essay, "The Poetics of Unpersuasion: Barnfield, Virgil, Shakespeare", very helpfully situates Barnfield's *The Affectionate Shepheard* within Virgilian pastoral and Ovidian epyllion traditions and argues that Barnfield deploys prosopopoeia to create a poetics of "unpersuasion": Barnfield and the Shakespeare of *Venus and Adonis* are revealed as participants in a shared literary aesthetic of frustrated desire and rhetorical breakdown. The chapter closes with a very interesting palaeographic note on the copy owned by William Burton (who moved in the circle around the Earl of Southampton) of Virgil's works now at Cambridge University Library which deserves further attention.

The third section is titled "In and Out of Conventions in Barnfield's Love Poetry", offering nuanced readings of his treatment of desire, beauty, and pastoral space. Danila Sokolov's chapter is a theoretically rich exploration of aesthetics and jurisprudence in Barnfield's *Cynthia* using a Kantian aesthetic perspective. Mattia Italiano is very frank in his view of Barnfield instituting a homoerotic "revolution", noting how Barnfield reshapes Petrarchan conventions to centre male beauty, male vulnerability, and homoerotic agency. On his part, Harry Matthews ("Ecology of Desire: Queer Pastoral and Unrequited Love in Richard Barnfield's *The Affectionalte Shepheard*") stimulatingly brings an ecocritical lens to appreciate Barnfield's work, connecting queer theory with the environmental humanities.

The final section exemplifies a turn towards the digital humanities and stylistics, offering methodological breadth to the collection. It is titled "Linguistic and Stylistic Approaches to Barnfield's Poetics" and is made up of two contributions. Aoife Beville's fine chapter "A Stylistic Approach to Irony in *The Encomion of Lady Pecunia*" provides a stylistic account of irony, wordplay, and communicative structure in Barnfield's mock encomium. She argues that Barnfield creates ironic distance through parallelism, punning, and the presence

of a 'double audience' in H. W. Fowler's terms, i.e. "an audience in-the-know, who arrive at the correct implicature, and a (sometimes hypothetical) naïve audience which arrives only at the surface meaning" (248). Fabio Ciambella's essay is perhaps the most methodologically innovative. Using programmes such as #LancsBox and Voyant Tools, he analyses lexical frequency, collocations, and morphosyntactic variation across Barnfield's works using corpus stylistic analysis. Ciambella's essay paves the way to future research while empirically grounding assertions such as the one according to which Barnfield's sonnets reveal a more explicitly homoerotic vocabulary than Shakespeare's (Sonnets 1-126).

The volume closes with Will Tosh's brief but important "Afterword": Richard Barnfield's reception has finally, hopefully "come of age" (284). Indeed, this volume is a landmark in Barnfield studies. It expands the field in three crucial directions: firstly, for the first time, Barnfield's entire corpus is addressed — from *The Affectionate Shepheard* to *Cynthia*, from *Cassandra* to *Lady Pecunia*. Secondly, it relies on an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing classical reception studies, queer theory, feminist theory (see especially Ganberg's chapter on the female gaze), ecocriticism, aesthetics and law, stylistics, and the digital humanities. The editors deserve recognition for bringing together scholars whose approaches intersect but do not converge into a single theoretical orthodoxy. Thirdly, the volume's insistence that Barnfield belongs *within* – not outside – the mainstream of Elizabethan poetic innovation should be applauded. If the volume has one limitation, it lies in the relative scarcity of sustained attention to Barnfield's readership and his books as material objects. But readers of this volume will be motivated to address Barnfield's place in early modern anthologies and examine hitherto hidden early responses to his poetry. *Richard Barnfield's Poetics* is an indispensable contribution to early modern literary studies and a milestone in the re-evaluation of a poet whose work has long merited greater scholarly attention.

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Shakespeare, il teatro dell'io. Individuo, soggetto, testo. Roma: Carocci, 2024.

In the ever-expanding and increasingly interdisciplinary landscape of Shakespeare studies, the collective volume *Shakespeare, il teatro dell'io. Individuo, soggetto, testi* (Shakespeare, the Theatre of the Self. Individual, Subject, Texts), published by Carocci in 2024, stands out as a work of particular significance. Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, Rocco Coronato, and Bianca Del Villano, the book investigates one of the most complex and fascinating questions posed by the playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon: the representation and construction of identity during a pivotal transition from a pre-modern era to the dawn of modernity. Through a series of essays spanning philology, literary criticism, the history of ideas, and performance analysis, the volume offers a multifaceted and profound exploration of how Shakespeare placed the notion of the self at the heart of his theatre in all its facets, revealing an internal drama that often complements and even surpasses the external drama of the plot.

The introduction by the editors, both lucid and programmatic, establishes the theoretical coordinates of the inquiry. The concept of 'theatre of the self' is not limited to a simple analysis of the individual Shakespearean character – or *in-dividual*, "in-diviso delle capacità di individuare categorie, valori, identità secondo un discorso logico" (un-divided in the capacity to identify categories, values, and identities according to a logical discourse, p. 15) as the three editors state – but extends to an understanding of how language, narration, and the very structure of the play contribute to shaping a complex and often fragmented identity. The volume is divided into four sections, each dedicated to the "tema specifico dei modi e delle articolazioni drammatiche e liriche della soggettività in Shakespeare" (the specific theme of the dramatic and lyrical modes and articulations of subjectivity in Shakespeare, p. 17).

Part 1, "Contesti e discorsi" (Contexts and discourses), examines the philosophical and political frameworks surrounding Shakespeare's depiction of the self. Rocco Coronato's opening chapter probes the very existence of a Shakespearean self, distinguishing between a relational ("che si percepisce come soggetto [e suddito] rispetto a qualche classe di appartenenza", which perceives itself as a subject [and subordinate] with respect to some class of belonging, p.

35), a profound, and a multiple 'I', this latter synthesised by Hamlet, who is "l'io più molteplice di tutti" (the most multifaceted self of all, p. 49). Angela Locatelli follows with a rich discussion of subjectivity as a form of "interpellazioni e controinterpellazioni decisamente eterogenee" (highly heterogeneous interpellations and counter-interpellations, p. 74), showing how characters' identities are shaped by and against political, religious, and patriarchal ideologies. The section concludes with Maria Del Sapio Garbero's illuminating analysis of "lo specchio come complesso strumento identitario" (the mirror as a complex identity tool, p. 105), demonstrating how Shakespeare's political subjects contend with and (sometimes) reconcile the fraught space between public and private selves.

Stylistic and performative features used to articulate the self are explored in the second section of the volume, "Testi, forme e stili" (Texts, forms and styles). Roberta Mullini offers a compelling account of the monologue, a form that became "espressione metonimica di alcuni testi drammatici" (metonymic expression of some plays, p. 113), which transcends simple exposition to reveal the innermost thoughts of a character's mind. Fernando Cioni explores the dynamic relationship between the dramatic 'I' through the lens of metatheatre, with examples ranging from the tragic irony of *Antony and Cleopatra* (pp. 138-46) to the comic awareness of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (pp. 146-53). Completing this part, Bianca Del Villano presents a pragmastylistic reading of character, analysing the nuanced and often shifting 'faces' (in a Goffmanian sense) of the self within Shakespeare's plays, notably in *Hamlet*, adopting the lens of the theory of (im)politeness.

Part 3, "Temi e problemi" (Themes and problems) explores specific textual and thematic aspects of identity across Shakespeare's genres. Donatella Montini examines the concept of the divided self in what she defines as the "Shakespeare storico" (Shakespeare as historian, p. 188), concentrating on the political body and the dynamic between the king's 'I', his physical body, and his voice, with a specific focus on *Henry V*. Focusing on the comedies from *Love's Labour's Lost* onwards, Rocco Coronato explores the transparency and divine nature of language, while Silvia Bigliazzi tackles the impossible catharsis in the tragedies, arguing that the Shakespearean self grapples with guilt, understood as "desiderio consapevole di un rovesciamento dei tradizionali valori etici" (a deliberate wish

to overturn traditional ethical values, p. 237) and a tragic mirror that reflects a lack of easy resolution. Emanuel Stelzer's illuminating contribution on the romances explores fragmentation and completion, highlighting a newfound sympathy and subjectivity in these later works, where "l'io chiede di essere ricomposto", since "il fugace senso di comunione tra i personaggi e quello tra attori e spettatori […] sono il trionfo del teatro" (the self asks to be recomposed; the fleeting sense of communion among the characters and that between actors and spectators are the triumph of theatre, p. 267). Finally, David Schalkwyk provides a meticulous close reading of Shakespeare's Sonnets, analysing the pronominal forms (*I*, *thou*, *you*) as reflections of difference and identity, with a particular focus on those sonnets which present a "struttura pronominale chiastica" (chiastic pronominal structure, p. 275).

Finally, the fourth section of *Shakespeare, il teatro dell'io*, titled "Approcci" (approaches), showcases innovative methodological frameworks for studying the Shakespearean self. Silvia Bigliazzi offers a fascinating textual comparison between the Q1 and Q2 versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, revealing the textual variations of Juliet's 'I' that the digital approach of the SENS project's archive (*Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and Their European Dissemination*, https://sens.skene.univr.it) can highlight. This segues into Alessandra Squeo's chapter on the digital turn, which demonstrates how Digital Humanities can be used to construct "pratiche discorsive e identità social[i]" (discursive practices and social identities, p. 348), especially in *The Merchant of Venice*. The volume concludes with a captivating and imaginative contribution from Shaul Bassi, who engages in a fictitious dialogue between Ophelia, "la bellezza verginale" (the virginal beauty) and Caliban, "la creatura mostruosa" (the monstrous creature, p. 367), to explore the posthuman and our relationship with nature, a truly modern epilogue.

The volume is a well-conceived and meticulously curated work. The interconnections between the various contributions are evident and constitute the true strength of the book. The variety of methodological approaches and the depth of analysis in each essay make for a rich and stimulating read. Every contribution stands out for its originality and scientific rigour, offering food for thought for both the specialist and the general reader interested in a deeper

understanding of Shakespeare. The extensive and up-to-date bibliography is a further valuable resource.

The main virtue of *Shakespeare, il teatro dell'io* lies in its ability to capture the essence of Shakespearean modernity not in a single concept but in its plural and dynamic nature: the self that emerges from his theatre is a fragmented, conflicted self, constantly renegotiated through language, the body, history, and performance. The book represents a significant contribution to Shakespearean studies and to literary theory in general, confirming the timeless relevance of the English playwright. Although an English translation would be desirable, as it would give the volume greater visibility – but I am sure the co-editors will carefully think about it very soon – with this volume, Bigliazzi, Coronato, and Del Villano have created a very much needed work for anyone who wants to understand how Shakespeare not only tells the stories of men but also "porta l'io sulla scena […] nel modo più pieno" (brings the self onto the stage in the fullest possible way, p. 17).

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