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Articles

FORGERY, DIS/POSSESSION, VENTRILOQUISM IN THE WORKS OF A. S. BYATT AND PETER ACKROYD

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Much has been written about the propensity of a vast part of contemporary fiction to seek its own voice via what Julian Barnes came to define in *Flaubert's Parrot* as literary psittacism. The law of the new that sustained literary modernity has been overthrown by the melancholy, Borgesian conviction that everything has been said. The pervading presence of parody, ventriloquism, reappropriation and travesty in contemporary English fiction especially seems to suggest that the guiding principle of innovation is on the wane and consequently that the author's authority over his/her creation will necessarily have to be redefined. The ventriloquism favoured by A.S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, and before them Angela Carter indeed implies a form of delegation of the power of voice to an instance whose identity is irremediably hybrid, in-between, as if un-authorized.[1] The very concept of creativeness seems to have become depleted and replaced with a weaker version of invention that equates writing with the mere reactivation of past idioms, with a form of clever if exhausted mimicry.

As if in a kind of infinite regress, acknowledging the exhaustion is in itself always already a cliché handed down to us by the theories of aesthetic negativity (Budick and Iser, 1987). As such, the demise of originality does not necessarily entail any drastic rethinking of the mimetic agenda of writing. On the contrary, for many a critic of our so-called postmodern condition, from Zygmunt Bauman to Fredric Jameson, from Jean Baudrillard to Charles Jencks, the logic of appropriation is in

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tune with the cultural logic in which we are caught, a cultural logic which results in the blurring of the former distinction between model and copy and which exploits the nostalgic counterfeiting of the past. With the 'pale of history', to resort to Arthur Danto's expression (Danto, 1997), historicism seems to have got the upper hand and to have ousted the modern arch concept of history, just as originality has been superseded by mimicry. Unlike Jameson's reading of historicism however, Danto's interpretation of this change of dominant remains resolutely optimistic, in spite of the fact that he acknowledges the current age to be one of 'aesthetic entropy' (Danto, 1997: 12). To him,

> the major artistic contribution of the decade was the emergence of the appropriated image —the taking over of images with established meaning and identity and giving them a fresh meaning and identity (Danto, 1997: 15).[2]

However, placing history under aesthetic erasure may also be interpreted as spelling the demise of creativity, as a perverse embracing of the spirit of death, as a renunciation to the genuinely dialectical affirmative energy of art. Fredric Jameson's by now well-known denunciation of parody as "speech in a dead language" (Jameson, 1991: 17) warns us against the all too enticing lures of nostalgic parody that forecloses the concept of originality to enclose us in a dizzying hall of mirrors. Whether one chooses to read this undoing of the concept of originality and authenticity as meaning the end of art or as implying a change of dominant the consequences of which it is our task to fathom, one cannot deny that the logic of aesthetic appropriation compels us to rehistoricize our understanding of such notions as authenticity, originality, forgery and, symmetrically, to try and assess the ideological import of such insistent return of/to the past of writing.

Haunted fakes

A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and many of Peter Ackroyd's novels, from *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* to *Chatterton* and *English Music* seem, at first glance, to be arch examples of the rampant historicism Jameson perceives to be at work in today's art. Their historicism does not confine itself to the realm of style; to a great extent it becomes the very stuff of their elegiac plots. In *Possession,* as in *English Music,* the elegiac mood ties in with the traditional heuristics of narrative, both novels resorting to the archaic motif of the quest. In *Possession*, the two protagonists — two present-day 19th century literature scholars— have embarked on the excavation of the hidden lives of two Victorian poets inspired by Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti. One of the present-day protagonists proving to be the descendant of both poets, they eventually succeed in retracing the lost threads of

filiation where previously there only existed random connections and misconstrued traces surfacing in inscrutable, mislaid letters, cryptic poems or lost tokens of love and betrayal. In *English Music* Tim, the child-medium, travels back into adapted versions of *Great Expectations* or of Blake's epic texts, meets William Byrd or William Hogarth, in order to uncover the essence of the Englishness of English art.[3] *Chatterton* elaborates on the paradigm of appropriation and deceit even more explicitly by developing five interwoven narratives offering five variants on a central meditation on authenticity, appropriation, forgery, creative authority and impersonation. Chatterton himself is, for instance, revealed to have faked his own suicide; in the present time, an arthritic painter employs a forger to produce paintings in his own manner; the central plot describes the quest of a failed writer hunting for the truth behind Chatterton's life of make-believe, a last plot describing Henry Wallis and George Meredith's confrontation as the painter paints his famous portrait of the novelist as Chatterton on his death-bed.

In all cases, the quest motif is too insistent to be anything but ironical. As often as not, these journeys towards the light of truth and a sense of authentic plenitude, will in fact disclose nothing but a sense of absence and dereliction. Byatt's and Ackroyd's fantasies seem to suggest that the exploratory dynamics of literature has run its course. This is the well-rehearsed tale of the end of all histories: once it has moved beyond its former historical condition, writing is supposedly condemned to be haunted, to shadow the past and to try to appropriate it in slightly adapted versions echoing lost original voices. When the energy of creation has become exhausted, only re-creation, in the two meanings of the term, subsists.

One may consider Byatt's and Ackroyd's haunted tales to pander to the syncretic playfulness of the clever art of citation favoured by such advocates of stylistic pluralism as the architect Robert Venturi. Unhinged from their historical frame, the literary references, the quotations and reconstructed texts, in the manner of Blake or Rossetti, Browning or Dickens, may seem to be mere floating signs, textualist stratagems, disenfranchised from history.[4]

The matter is of course far more complex than might be suggested by Jameson's dismissal of textualism and of its related historicism. The paradigms or metaphors adduced by Byatt and Ackroyd to convey the incapacity to exorcise the anxiety of influence speak for themselves. If Byatt and Ackroyd are possessed by the past, theirs is anything but a playful kind of possession. It is a "demonic possession", as Ackroyd himself suggests in relation to T.S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Ackroyd, 1993: 27). When the sacred fount of art has dried up, no parousia is to be expected, except one of a dark, crepuscular kind. Writing is caught in an echo-chamber of its own making, an echo-chamber haunted with ghostly visions. The fact that Byatt should have chosen to stage the resolution of the plot

of *Possession* in a churchyard, where the characters unearth the hitherto unknown last letter of Christabel La Motte to Randolph Ash is allegorical of Byatt's understanding of literature's present predicament. Ackroyd's biography of William Blake similarly pictures the poet-seer finding his inspiration as well as learning his trade in Westminster Abbey as he makes drawings of the monuments for the first volume of Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* which James Basire had been commissioned to prepare engravings for:

> He experienced an intense collaboration with mortality, and with the remnants of the past [...] He entered a communion with the dead, with the passage of the generations, and thereby was granted a vision of the world that never left him (Ackroyd, 1996: 46).

It is only logical that Chatterton and Blake should be seen to commune in a common reverence for the past which eventually makes the binary opposition between authenticity and forgery of little account and which concurrently redefines writing as possession (Ackroyd, 1996: 44). While trying to forge anew, to reinvent language, the writer is condemned in fact to be spoken by the past, is encrypted in the monumental, funeral architecture of past literature. In that respect the ambiguity of Randolph Ash's surname, in *Possession*, is all too transparent. Coleridge's organic vision of the natural development of the tree of literature may in fact only disclose a landscape of cold ashes. Negativity would thus seem to have triumphed over the modern principle of invention.

Memory, or more precisely hypermnesia, disempowers the writer who, like Ackroyd's own version of the Pip of *Great Expectations*, is doomed to wonder endlessly:

> What have I inherited? And from what —from whom— have I inherited it? I walk, I talk, as if everything were of my own volition, as if I understood precisely what it was that sent me rushing through the world. But now it is as if I were possessed by a stranger. Literally possessed (Ackroyd, 1992: 84).

The same insistent sense of possession pervades all of Ackroyd's texts, his biographies as well as his novels or his monumental essays such as *London. The Biography* or *Albion*. The test of literariness lies in its capacity to sing the dead back to life with "a terrible threnody" (Ackroyd, 1991: 546). Such communing with the ghostly shadows of the past may be interpreted as a mere homage to the unique Gothic spirit of English literature; it is also an implicit attack on the enduring modern law of innovation and inventiveness.

The truth of forgery: towards impersonality

Redefining writing as possession implies that one turns one's back on the Platonic binary opposition between original and copy, between truth and make-believe, while paradoxically reinstating it. In *Possession*, *Chatterton* and *English Music*, Byatt and Ackroyd seem in fact to have moved a long way from the system of values of which the opposed concepts of originality and forgery partook. For all its dubiousness, for all its destabilizing of the established contours of authenticity, the contract inherent to forgery still necessitated faith in the metaphysics of presence and of truth. The pragmatics of forgery relies on our being able to distinguish ontologically between truth and lie. Ackroyd's dizzying meditation on the demise of this ontological set of beliefs in his novel *Chatterton* jeopardizes this ontological contract. The plot running parallel to the central character's hunt for what proves in fact to be an apocryphal version of Thomas Chatterton's life, and in which the assistant of a famous painter takes over from him and produces paintings which become indistiguishable from what the originals might have been, allegorizes the ontological questioning central to today's redefinition of originality. The mirror-effects created between the two plots also reflect and reflect on the economics of authority underwriting the concept of authenticity. "What's in a name?" Ackroyd seems to ask with Shakespeare's Juliet, if not the key to the interlacing of authorship and authority, if not the fetishistic transmutation of the artist's aura into a legally binding reference.

The moment the seals of this legally binding distinction between truth and lie have been broken, the moment one starts considering that "the truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry" (Ackroyd, 1988: 87), writing escapes the jurisdiction of originality to pass into that of inventive mimicry. Pastiche as it is practiced by Ackroyd and Byatt seems thus to function not so much as a weaker form of forgery but rather as a paradoxical form of creative imitation. The text flaunts its stylistic mask instead of erasing the clues to its facticity. Its purpose is thus not to steal a stylistic identity, but on the contrary to leave the breach unhealed and insist that this raising of the literary dead yields but a second hand identity. Like forgery, contemporary pastiche still avails itself of the auratic value of authenticity. However its polyphony fails to achieve perfect impersonation and is thus as melancholy as it is playful. In that respect it may be interpreted as some failed work of mourning which endlessly commemorates voices that were once incarnate and vibrant with a sense of presence.

The quest for the buried words of Randolph Ash and Christabel la Motte in *Possession* or Tim's distraught pilgrimage in *English Music* eventually come to hollow out the writer's voice. The characters are seen struggling with a heritage that weighs them down, that possesses them to the point of making them

impersonal. Appropriation thus also makes for an extreme form of impersonality that is indebted to Eliot's definition of the concept while placing this definition at one remove.

Ackroyd and Byatt seem to agree with Eliot that writing is partly ventriloquism. Ackroyd's biography of Eliot repeatedly insists on the poet's capacity to impersonate voices, to put on stylistic masks in his creative borrowing of styles and syntax "which releases a plethora of 'voices' and perceptions" (Ackoyd, 1993: 117). Just as much a form of training or drilling as the one gone through by academic painters, this borrowing also means that "there is no 'truth' to be found, only a number of styles and interpretations —one laid upon the other in an endless and apparently meaningless process" (Ackroyd, 1993: 119). According to the biographer, the same impersonality, the same evasion of truth is to be found in Dickens's "ability [...] to assume a variety of characters and voices" that suggest "both a mastery and an evasion of personality" so that impersonation becomes "a way of lifting the burden of selfhood" (Ackroyd, 1991: 147).[5]

Yet, one should draw a distinction between the syncretic capacity that according to Eliot was also of the essence of writing and Ackroyd's or Byatt's own handling of ventriloquism in *English Music* or *Possession*. Whereas for T.S. Eliot the poet was able to engage with a tradition that was simultaneously authorized and empowered by this engagement, today's great ventriloquists admit to being aesthetically possessed and condemned to be spoken by the past without necessarily succeeding in transcending it. Failing to forge a new language out of the voices of the past, the writer is doomed to remain an imposter, an impersonator merely adopting a series of stylistic postures: Browning's dramatic monologue, Blake's epic accents or Wilde's theatrical voice in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. The experience of dis/possession cannot be overcome; on the contrary it is relentlessly repeated. Tim's encounter with the Red Queen in Ackroyd's rewriting of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in chapter two of *English Music* is in that respect allegorical of the disempowering of the writing self. Unable to remember his name Tim is christened by the Red Queen "Isoecho" which, the red Queen insists, "means I saw echoes" (Ackroyd, 1992: 31). The vocalic indeterminacy is emblematic of the papery flimsiness of the writer who has no proper voice anymore. Already in his early *Notes for a New Culture*, Ackroyd had laid emphasis on Pound's reworking of the modern poetic "I" which was no longer, according to his reading of Pound, "that of moral experience [...] but the combined voice of earlier poetry" (Ackroyd, 1976: 35).[6]

Such undoing of originality, such emphasis on the collective nature of inspiration was of course already central to earlier definitions of the art of citation or of forgery. However successful, forgery also posited that individual genius could be

appropriated. The status of the very concept of creation has however irremediably changed. Contemporary ventriloquism seems to imply that the process of covert empowering inherent to Chatterton's romantic forgery or to modernist intertextuality is no longer to be achieved. Deprived of the creative impact of Eliot's syncretic impersonality, it fails to rethink the collusion existing between the logic of aesthetic property and the Kantian (and then modernist) concept of genius which allows Eliot and Pound to reclaim the past in order to claim quotation to be creative. On the contrary, it corroborates this collusion while refusing to exploit it and to appropriate the past as modernist poets or artists would appropriate found objects or found texts. The voice of pastiche remains literally improper, avowedly fake. Furthermore, unlike the true counterfeiter —to coin a paradoxical phrase— the ventriloquist does not pocket the benefits to be derived from eschewing one's self in order to become somebody else.

The position of the ventriloquist is an ambiguous one. He does not truly appropriate the other's voice so as to truly avail himself of his aura; yet he necessarily needs this aura to validate his own literary venture into the always already known. Thus he both kills the author while forcefully reinstating him as a set of distinguished and distinguishable style effects, or as this "fonction auteur" introduced by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1983). The very pragmatics of *Possession* and *English Music* relies on this mannerism, if one may take the concept literally, the text affecting the reader in so far as it affects to mimic past voices.

The ventriloquist does not so much construct himself as other, as disembody himself, lingering thus as the empty echo of a once authentic voice which he however needs in order to flaunt his own emptiness. As the respectful heir to a great, now impoverished line, the ventriloquist sidesteps the discredit that eventually attaches to the forger, while never fully basking in the aura of stolen or faked identity. *English Music* is in that respect exemplary of the new economics of intertextuality and of literary value that has replaced the former more daring logic of forgery. One can only give Ackroyd credit for always crediting his sources of inspiration. His work's credit lies precisely in its intelligent aesthetic investment, in its openly acknowledging what his vested interests are. Symmetrically its value lies, at one remove, in the value Dickens's, Carroll's, Blake's works have been invested with by literary history. Paradoxically such complex transfer of value relies on the now exhausted belief in the metaphysics of presence according to which the use value of a text lay precisely in its being attributable to a unique, original voice.

Needless to say, ventriloquism may yield itself to a different, altogether more optimistic interpretation. According to this, intertextual free play is achieved which allows us to escape the strictures of authenticity and enjoy the communion of spirits more characteristic of the pre-modern era. As Michel Schneider reminds us in his

essay on plagiarism, the ideology of aesthetic authenticity is but a recent invention, following in the wake of the modern definition of genius and of the autonomous subject. In France, the legislation on intellectual property was introduced with the Revolution in 1791 and then 1793 (Schneider, 1985: 39). Does the end of the grand-narrative of artistic progress thus release us into a form of uchronia already present in Dickens's imagination ("There is something which exists beyond the ordinary reaches of chronology; and it is to be found in Dickens's novels" [Ackroyd, 1991: 667]) and also fantasized by Jorge Luis Borges in "Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius"? Could the desubjectivation of the writer's voice, his disempowerment be a paradoxical instrument of the immanence characteristic, according to Ihab Hassan, of postmodernist literature and of the death of the subject and of the all-powerful romantic figure of the author (Hassan, 1987)?

Already in his *Notes for a New Culture*, Ackroyd extolled the virtues of a language, here embodied by Joyce's *Ulysses*, which would have "retrieved its history" and which "emerges as its only subject", a literature "about nothing" (Ackroyd, 1976: 59). According to this reading of intertextuality, literature authorizes, begets itself in an ongoing dialogue with the past, once it is disencumbered of the overweening authority of the subjective writer.[7] This is what, according to Ackroyd, Chatterton had already understood and the paradoxical "truth" Blake learnt from him (Ackroyd, 1996: 50). Flouting diachrony, all Ackroyd's seers seem to espouse the same belief in the communion of minds across History. The *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds which provide one of the epigraphs to *English Music* and Eliot's opening words to "Burnt Norton" which haunt Ackroyd's entire work would thus partake of the same vision of the dehistoricized immanence of creation.

> Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory: nothing can come of nothing.
>
> Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse* II

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future
> And time future contained in time past.
>
> T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Writing seems here to have become paradoxically apostate in this disenfranchisement from the yoke, the authority of authorship. Yet its freedom is not that of the modern heroic shelleyan poet-hero who forges a new idiom and breaks his chains. It pertains to a different form of hypostasis according to which the figure of the author is superseded by that of a collective spirit seen to be at the very root of all writing and which transcends individual authors, thus making the concept of forgery or of innovation irrelevant to the proper understanding of the value of art.

Commemoration

Writing holds the entire history of literature at the tip of its pen. Yet the reconfiguration involved in this process of reappropriation is of a mournful sort. Once more, the ultimate mood of literary appropriation remains ambivalent. As the metafictional paradigms referring to the world of death to be found everywhere in Ackroyd's texts and in Byatt's *Possession* imply, the capacity of literature to reinvent the past, to forge it anew has become problematic. Whereas, in "The Literature of replenishment", John Barth could hail the arrival of a generation of writers who "neither merely repudiate nor merely imitate either [their] twentieth-century modernist parents or [their] nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents" (Barth, 1992: 178). Contemporary pastiche seems to preclude any transcension of the past. Cultural commemoration has replaced invention. Writing has become one of the "memory sites" analysed by Pierre Nora (Nora, 1992), a uchronian space in which texts are seen to wander endlessly as *Blake*'s incipit suggests: "In the visionary imagination of William Blake there is no birth and no death, no beginning and no end, only the perpetual pilgrimage within time towards eternity" (Ackroyd, 1996: 3).

In lieu of the breakthrough of the new, appropriation orchestrates the return of identifiable, stable identities by plundering a cultural habitus common to the prospective readers. Instead of opening a new space of indeterminacy and *unheimlichkeit*, it takes us back to the hearth/heart of our aesthetic *heim* or home, to Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983). Writing proves literally nostalgic, aching with a longing to be taken back to its imaginary origins. As Harold Bloom and then Margaret Rose suggested about parody, it thus also involves a form of "strong reading" (Rose, 1993: 90), which in turn defines a community of model readers, as if retroactively. Yet unlike parody, pastiche, as it is practiced in *English Music* and *Possession*, does not seem to have any obvious critical intent. It does undoubtedly reflect upon canon formation, yet does not engage in a critical dialogue with the canon it elects as worthy of being appropriated. The genius of culture, the "music of Albion", seems to have silenced individual genius. The recreation of past idioms, of lost cadences is always a resuscitation (Ackroyd, 1996: 250). Writing may thus be redefined as prosopopeia, a prosopopeia that deprives literature of any dialectical capacity. Its pragmatic effect lies almost exclusively in its ability to arouse echoes. It thus triggers off a process of stylistic identification in the reader which folds the canon back upon itself and indeed forecloses the history of literary forms. Beyond the pale of history, only a form of nostalgic historicism seems to prevail which one could easily mistake for the "blank parody" of the neo aesthetics denounced by Fredric Jameson (Jameson,

1991: 17). As a kind of extended prosopopeia, it can indeed be conceived as "speech in a dead language", as literally "the wearing of a linguistic mask".

However, Ackroyd's and Byatt's cryptographic art is removed from the "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (Jameson, 1991: 18) Jameson sees as archetypal of neo aesthetics. Their nostalgic mood is indeed ambiguous. While it seems to pander to the conservative nostalgia of our heritage culture, it also concurrently functions as an allegorical reflection deconstructing our cultural habitus as well as our —admittedly— conservative sense of loss. The art of appropriation is anything but random and —if one may return to the economics of authenticity previously analysed— gratuitous. Indeed the price of appropriation is a heavy one to pay, since it is that of originality and autonomy. Far from being a remote and soothingly containable fantasy, this "English music" is, if anything, in fact all too haunting, all too authoritative, all too culturally binding still, its "hieroglyph [...] encircles us" (Ackroyd, 1992: 172). Similarly, far from resulting in the "waning of affect" denounced by Jameson in the contemporary triumph of simulacra, ventriloquism becomes deeply elegiac. But its nostalgia is far from playful, far from soothing. The past is indeed a distant country which no commemoration is likely to take us back to; yet we keep harking back, yearning to be reunited with its supposed sense of plenitude.

Paradoxically a form of contradictory historicity is reinstated in this open breach which challenges the common idea that literary appropriation allows literature to opt out of history. The pain involved in conjuring up a departed language, a departed sense of belonging necessarily situates the novelist in a historical continuum, however dislocated it may be. A contradictory sense of historicity is consequently achieved which makes it impossible for the art of appropriation to step out of history while conjuring up only a landscape of borgesian circular ruins.[8] As is suggested by the paronomastic play on words linking "dad", "dead" and "farther" introduced in Tim's dialogue with Obstinate and Pliable, in chapter two of *English Music* ("I wish Dad were here. He would know exactly what to do" / "I shouldn't say dead if I were you. I should say farther" [Ackroyd, 1992: 29]), innovation is inextricably bound up with the acknowledgement of the writer's symbolical debt to his forefathers, while paradoxically this very debt seems to lock him in a deathly embrace with the past, to bury or encrypt creativeness even as it is formulated.

Yet an altogether different kind of reading could be proposed of the dis/possession at work here. Appropriating and reconfiguring the past may also afford us some purchase on a meaningless present. Far from relinquishing their faith in the past, Byatt and Ackroyd relie on the persistent value of inherited voices to bail the present out of anomia. Part of the popularity of *Possession* and *English Music* stem

from the fact they are essentially "romans à clefs" which impose a strong reading by which a sense of cultural order is eventually achieved. To counter the "waning of affect", ventriloquism still needs, like forgery, the seal of the author's stylistic signature. Modern art conceived itself as intrinsically apostate. For Byatt and Ackroyd there is, on the contrary, no apostasy, no running away from the past. In that respect, nostalgic pastiche is indebted to this metaphysics of presence the free play of heteroglossia is supposed to deconstruct. It is this very metaphysics of presence which, albeit of a shadowy nature, may instil some sense of meaningfulness into a derelict present.

Byatt's private pantheon is in itself revealing. According to her the great writers of the Victorian age (Browning, Tennyson or George Eliot) already conceived of writing as a form of resuscitation, as a form of prosopopeia which had the capacity to raise the dead. In her essay "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Art", she thus turns the miracle of Elisha (2 Kings: 4.34) into an allegory of writing. Quoting from Book I of *The Ring and the Book*: "Mimic creation, galvanism for life / But still a glory portioned in the scale", Byatt construes resurrection in terms metaphorical of pastiche and mimicry: "The act of resuscitation is an act of love; it is a passing of life and identity from one figure to the identical other, which then warms" (Byatt, 1993: 47). In this transfusion, the respective identities of the dead and of the miracle-worker come to be blurred. In the miracle of Elisha, the dead child is brought back to life by the prophet's breath. The past still has the privilege of essence and presence over a bloodless present waiting to be galvanized into existence.[9]

Yet Byatt also knows that between the parable and Browning's appropriation there lies this same breach which ventriloquism fails to heal. According to Byatt, Browning, like Tennyson, writes on the brink of a tomb, in the full awareness that the "glory portioned" by "mimic creation" is but a thin-blooded version of the original words. The mournful elegies of Browning, the sad dirges of William Byrd, the haunting words of Thomas Chatterton share with their contemporary recreation an experience of writing as postlapserian. There is no going back to an original text that would guarantee the authenticity of meaning. Writing is always apocryphal. Moving beyond the grand-narrative of aesthetic progress may have laid bare the deceptiveness of originality. However for Byatt and Ackroyd it has not exorcised the desire to achieve incarnation, to steal the right Promethean fire. If anything it has made it more urgent.

Notes

[1]. I do not mean to suggest that all practice a similar kind of rewriting or reappropriation. Needless to say, Carter's forceful political agenda in her rewriting of Perrault's tales in *The Bloody Chamber* allows her to write very much in her own name and her intertextuality precisely entails a foregrounding of the feminine voice in this radical reappropriation of masculine discourse. Nevertheless, one should ponder on this very post-modern move which leads Carter back to the present of writing via such a circuitous path. As such it implicitely reveals how problematic the very notion of novelty may have become in a present that is no longer that of the avant-garde and yet which comes after the great avant-gardes.

[2]. Ihab Hassan chooses to read our posthistorical condition in a similarly positive light when he commends art's present "dialectic of equitemporality" —a concept borrowed from Heidegger— which he perceives as "a new relation between historical elements, without any suppression of the past in favor of the present" (Hassan, 1987: 171).

[3]. In that respect, *English Music* may be considered as the novelistic matrix of Ackroy'd most recent essay, *Albion. The Origins of the English Imagination* (Ackroyd, 2002), in which he elaborates his own haunting nostalgia into a national, atemporal trait of character, thus implicitly sidestepping the current warnings against the dangers of historicism. Needless to say, Ackroyd's nostalgic national narrative is anything but ideology-free, since it can easily read as a belated, post-modern version of the Burkean conservative defense of the transcendent authority of the stabilising dialectic of permanence through change.

[4]. One must at this point insist on the historicity of the very concept of textualism. Even in the field of French formalist theory, this disenfranchising has a history, if only the history which, under the influence of the Tel Quel group and of Roland Barthes, brought the author to the scaffold and hailed the triumph of the text and of the abstract concept of writing. This history has not gone unheeded. As early as 1983, Marc Angenot chose to deconstruct its hidden logic, already bearing in mind the way the notion of intertextuality had travelled across the Atlantic and had been appropriated by Fredric Jameson, Jonathan Culler and Harold Bloom (Angenot, 1983).

[5]. See also his description of Dickens, like Eliot, as a "ventriloquist" (Ackroyd, 1991: 283).

[6]. Although this essay —which Ackroyd actually disowns today as the mere rambling of a complacent research student— remains in the line of the grand narrative of modernism as the last and supreme stage in the glorious story of aesthetic autonomization, a hindsight effect may also allow us to read in its foregrounding of impersonality the incipient meditation on the dialectic of possession and dispossession that is central to the rest of his work. Thus his interest in Duchamp's ready-mades and on their "overturning of the metaphysics of 'presence' within the object, of what is unique and personal" (Ackroyd, 1976: 44) can be interpreted as an anticipation of his definition of writing as haunted impersonation.

[7]. In his history of the concept of intertextuality, Marc Angenot of course insists on the coincidence between the rise of intertextuality and the critique of the subject heralded by Tel Quel or Lacan (Angenot, 1983: 130).

[8]. See Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions*. Peter Ackroyd's novel *First Light* already exploits a similar set of metaphors, including the archeological paradigm, to systematize a circular conception of creation, across time.

[9]. For his part, Ackroyd insists on the influence Swedenborg had on Blake because of his belief "that the spirits of the dead rose from the body and reassumed physical form in another world. He was the philosopher who could give substance to Blake's visions, in other words, and reaffirm Blake's own instinctive sense of life and death" (Ackroyd, 1996: 99).

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EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS HATED ABOUT THATCHER'S BRITAIN: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MIKE LEIGH'S *HIGH HOPES* (1988)[1]

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One of the major trajectories in cultural studies has been to introduce into the academy previously excluded and disenfranchised subjects (Abbas, 1996: 290). In this respect even a late-comer like Spain has benefitted from developments abroad. Indeed, already in the 50s and 60s, cultural studies emerged in Britain as a form of dissent against the ideological bias of ruling-class culture, which took the directions of a critique of ideology, the study of subcultures and working-class cultures, and the study of the mass media. The related critiques of race and gender soon also became part of the same agenda, followed (especially in the United States) by multiculturalism and the politics of identity which allowed ethnic minorities to voice their dissenting views on Western *historical* culture (Robins, 1997:61; Gilroy, 1997: 299-346).

From this very brief rehearsal of well-known trends, the obvious observation is that the enlarged and inclusive notion of culture developed by cultural studies in Britain and the United States (without forgetting Canada or Australia) has won real spaces in the Spanish academy, most universities having by now opened their curricula to marginal voices and positions. And yet, in its travels to Spain, its seems that cultural studies has simultaneously lost or shed one of its most important peculiarities: namely its radical, critical, *political* sparkle.[2] As I have argued elsewhere (1999:12-13; 2001: 15-18), despite the number of self-declared cultural studies courses, projects and publications crowding the academic marketplace, so far, there have

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been few systematic efforts to reflect on what is entailed when one decides to adopt a cultural studies label to define one's work.

It is with this contention in mind that I propose a *cultural* reading of Mike Leigh's 1988 film, *High Hopes*. Precisely because cultural studies is not based on disciplines, but focused on issues regarding gender, class, sexuality, national identity, colonialism, race, ethnicity, etc. (Giroux, 1999), my intention is to put into practice its transdiciplinary approach to understanding the world by relating/connecting it to the adjacent field of cinema, which has tended to define itself outside cultural studies. In this respect, the present analysis can be looked upon as an attempt to supplement film theory's focus on the specificities of the medium, text and genre with a view of the "text" (visual text) as thoroughly contextual. In part, this will require looking at *High Hopes* from the perspective put forward by Norman Fairclough in his fourfold legitimisation of textual analysis (1995: 208-9). As a cultural linguist, Fairclough's *theoretical* reason stems from his conviction that language is widely misinterpreted as transparent. He therefore recommends drawing together contexts and texts as a form of social action, especially if the purpose is to unearth those mechanisms at work in language that "produce, reproduce and transform social structures". His *methodological* reason is that texts constitute a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes. The *historical* reason is that texts are sensitive barometers of social processes, movements and change. Finally, the *political* reason is that it is increasingly through texts (visual texts included) that social control, social domination *and* contestation are exercised.

Fundamental to this line of thinking is the conviction that political and ideological concerns cannot be bracketed out of *any* cultural analysis. As Lawrence Grossberg vehemently put it, cultural studies takes the political, the ideological to be its theoretical "heart" (1997:196; 237; 284). This affirmation is suggestive of my own approach to Mike Leigh's film. What follows will therefore be a radically contextual —ideological *and* political— attempt to unearth relation(s) between *High Hopes* —a (mass) cultural product— and *Culture* itself. Hence, after a little detour into the economic, social and political situation during the eighties in Britain, Leigh's film will be examined from the perspective of genre, in conjunction with a brief discussion of the film's conditions of production and the position of the director. This background information will then enable me to concentrate on the text itself and extrapolate from it the extent to which its comic portrayal of class, family and sexuality is in fact connected to and conditioned by context. More concretely, my aim is to expose how, for all its humorous focus on the actions, interactions and intimacy of three different couples, Leigh's *High Hopes* is —or represents— a direct and corrosive attack on the social inequity, greed and meanness generated by Thatcher and her conservative governments during the eighties.

Cultural studies' political and ideological tenet is grounded in the theory of "articulation" developed by Stuart Hall in the eighties in which he argues that the meaning of cultural texts and practices is invariably the result of: "a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, *under certain historical conditions*, but need not necessarily, be connected" (my emphasis) (1986: 53). In other words, the process called articulation is the practice of mapping connections, establishing correspondences, linking "this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics" (in Daryl Slack, 1997: 115), but with a view of meaning as always expressed in (and determined by) a specific context, a specific historical moment, within specific discourse(s).

With this in mind, let us begin with a little historical detour or bird's-eye-view of the eighties. During Thatcher's eleven years in power, the ruthless unleashing of market forces may have helped a great number of British people to prosper materially but at the same time it turned Britain into a morally callous, crude, and desperate society where a falling quality of life was "covered up" by a rising standard of living (Quart, 1994, 241). In a few words, Thatcher helped create a country where the rich got richer and consumed more conspicuously, while the ethic of social responsibility began to crumble. As the South of England and London became more prosperous and yuppified, the industrial North's steel towns and mining villages withered away. This growing geographical and social division was further accentuated by the Prime-Minister's policies which included cuts in public spending, tax reductions weighed towards the affluent and, where possible, the privatisation of social services.[3] Thus, despite the high-tech and financial industries flourishing in the South, the number of homeless rose nationwide to one million and twenty per cent of the people lived below the poverty line.[4] Also, burglary, violence and vandalism increased so much that Britain achieved the dubious distinction of having the third highest prison population within the European community (after Portugal and Spain) (Abercrombie & Warde, 2002, 542). Seen from this angle, it seems no exaggeration to state that one of Thatcher's prime legacies was a more impoverished life for a sizeable portion of the population. Even so, with much of the traditional political opposition (the Labour Party leadership, the unions, Liberals and Social Democrats) neutralised by the party in power (Woodward, 2000, 96; Ramsay, 2002, 29; 35), a large segment of the working class, who had regularly voted Labour, went over to the other camp, embracing the Tory vision of an enterprise culture. In fact, dissatisfaction with the Labour party and disorientation in the opposition ranks were so great during the decade or so of "Tory" rule that British films of the eighties seemed to be one of the few remaining ideological weapons effective enough to confront the Thatcher tide.

In this respect, the importance of the cycle of films John Hill labels "state of the nation films" (1999: 133-165) is that it offered a clear alternative to the image of

a prosperous, entrepreneurial, and triumphant Britain promoted by Thatcher's favourite advertising agency, Saatchi and Saatchi (Young, 1993: 508-10), as well as by much of the daily press. Thus, although formally and aesthetically diverse, films like *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), *High Hopes* (1988), *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) and *Riff-Raff* (1991) (among others) shared a similar thematic preoccupation, projecting as they did critical images of contemporary Thatcherite Britain to international audiences.

These "state of the nation" films are in striking contrast to that group of internationally successful British films, produced in the same decade, known as "heritage films", whose salient feature was their apparent recoil from the turbulent present and their preference for invoking, in a pictorial, decorative style enveloped in nostalgia, a more serene, pastoral, hierarchic Britain.[5] The group of films under consideration depicts Britain as a flagrantly urban society, heterogeneous, socially fractured, and permeated with large pockets of unemployment and poverty. Even so, in foregrounding the damage wrought by de-industrialisation, mass unemployment and poverty typical of the Thatcher years, these films, Carney and Quart remark (2000: 6), made no claim to promote an alternative *political* perspective. The only political certitude that the directors and their films shared was that of an arrogant, vindictive Margaret Thatcher as a political villain. Hence, if the British directors of "state of the nation films" (excepting Ken Loach, whose explicitly socialist appeals to an increasingly beleaguered working-class have remained unchanged)[6] did not have an antidote to Thatcherism, their work at least represented a potent way of exposing, denouncing the injustices, meanness, greed, and absurdity of much of contemporary life during the Thatcher era.

This is certainly the case with *High Hopes* which was critically applauded as the best film in the 1988 New York film Festival (Quart &Quart, 1989: 56) and which represented Mile Leigh's return to the big screen after seventeen years' break from the medium.[7] Set mostly around the King's Cross area in London, the film examines the interconnected lives of seven characters: the hippyish couple made up of Cyril (Philip Davis), a despatch rider, and his gardener girlfriend Shirley (Ruth Sheen); Cyril's bitterly morose mother, Ms Bender (Edna Doré), the last elderly council tenant on a gentrified Islington street[8] and next-door neighbour to the repellently yuppy Rupert and Laeticia Boothe-Braines (David Bamber and Lesley Manville); and Valerie (Heather Tobias), Cyril's sister, a neurotic, hyperactive social climber married to the crassly entrepreneurial Martin Burke (Philip Jackson).

Through the actions and interactions of all these characters and some striking secondary figures, Leigh conveys (or "articulates") *a* view of the social tone and class tensions developed during the eighties in Britain. For instance, as Shirley jokingly comments, she has named one of the spikiest cacti in her collection of

plants "Ms Thatcher", "because it's a pain in the arse". *High Hopes* is undoubtedly an acutely political film. However, as a perceptive article in *Cineaste* remarked (Ellickson & Porton, 1994: 10), it is also typical of Mike Leigh to refuse to engage in straightforward political sloganeering, preferring instead a distanced view and dispassionate tone. In Ellickson and Porton's words, Leigh "is a left-leaning director who has no inclination to make films that will inspire the working-class to mount the barricades". In a sense, Cyril can be seen as a mouthpiece of this attitude for while he frequently condemns the Tories with articulate fury, his mixture of cynicism and languor prevents him from being the exemplary radical, left-wing heroe. Nor does Leigh offer easy (political) answers (and certainly not Marxist solutions). Instead, he prefers to "share" ideas, predicaments, feelings and emotions with the audience (Petley, 2000: 591). Hence, as occurs in many of Leigh's other films, the whole story in *High Hopes* hovers between comedy and tragedy, with despair constantly lurking beneath the surface. It is this pervading feeling of impending doom, sometimes amidst hilarious scenes, that makes Leigh's work "political" in the personal, formal and aesthetic sense rather than in any easily identifiable party political sense.

It is impossible to discuss Leigh's work without discussing his working methods. In fact, as Michael Coveny asserts (1997: 96-7), the director's methods have changed little since he developed them in the theatre in the mid nineteen sixties. As Leigh himself stated in 1973:

> I begin with a general area which I want to investigate. I choose my actors and tell them that I don't want to talk to them about the play. (There is no play at this stage). I ask them to think of several people of their own age. Then we discuss these people till we find the character I want. Each actor then builds up his or her own character through a lengthy process of research and improvisation, both in the rehearsal room and in real locations. Only when the actors have fully "found" their characters are they brought together and the all-important relationships are formed between the characters: the play is what happens to the characters, what they make for themselves. Behaviour dictates situation". The main work, therefore, is done in research, improvisation and rehearsal long before the camera appears; by that time "there's very much a script. It just happens that I don't start with a document, that's all" (Petley, 2000: 591).

This points us towards a central fact of Leigh's oeuvre: that it is absolutely *not* naturalistic (Carney & Quart, 2000: 34-35). In reply to those critics who try and pigeonhole the director as incapable of portraying "real people" (Kennedy, 1991: 18; Coveney, 1997: 190-1), his work may best be described as "distilled or heightened realism" (Petley, 2000: 591), which certainly does not preclude elements of humour and even caricature in his depictions of characters. In this

respect, the Booth-Braines, are certainly caricatures of typical Tory "nouveaux riches" but they are entirely believable, as is Cyril's sister, the appalling Valerie. Thus, for all the inordinate characterisation of some personae, a great deal is suggested indirectly by showing, in a distorted, figurative way, the world of the eighties as it actually was (Ruchti, 1989:19). Leigh is a merciless observer of the British but his critique is subtly "camouflaged" under the quotidian surface appearance of the film. Speaking at the time of the release of *High Hopes*, Leigh talked revealingly of "distilling my metaphor out of an absolutely tangible, real and solid and plausible and vulnerable and unheroic and unexotic kind of world" (Petley, 2000: 591). Not for nothing therefore does Leigh have his most positive characters, Cyril and Shirley, visit the tomb of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, on which is written, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to *change* it" (my emphasis).

High Hopes is not built around a narrative that moves neatly from incident to incident to a conclusion. Leigh begins the film with a stranger, Wayne (Jason Watkins), a dim provincial who arrives from a place called Byfleet to stay with his sister.[9] Completely lost in the metropolis, he asks Cyril and Shirley for directions, "she lives in London, do you know her?" The couple take pity on him and offer him shelter for the night. The trouble is that, in the following days, he keeps returning to use their bathroom and sleep over, to their gently amused annoyance. He then finally leaves (early in the film). He is someone who has no connection at all to the other characters or to anything that happens later in the film, except that in this character's slightly retarded and dissociated manner Leigh manages to create his distinctive, odd blend of comedy and plaintive desperation. Wayne's role as the vague, totally lost "country bumpkin" serves to counterbalance those other characters who have adapted to the "new Britain". Simultaneously, his plight in London establishes an early basis from which Cyril and Shirley's relation to someone in need can then be compared with how the Tory couple, the prime beneficiaries of Thatcher's reign, behave towards Ms Bender when she locks herself out of her house.

Clearly, the couple which unifies all the episodes in *High Hopes* is the one made up of Cyril and Shirley. As representatives of good, good-humoured civic solidarity, both young people are archetypes of the society left behind by the Thatcher revolution. Cyril is a bearded, demi-intellectual who reads *Lenin for Beginners*. He wears jeans, smokes pot, and at the age of thirty-five, works at a dead-end job as a motorbike messenger. He is clearly an alien in Thatcher's Britain, a man with no interest in money, social status or material goods. He simply adapts each day to a cold, impersonal world which treats him as if he were invisible. He is also a quietly angry man filled with class resentment. Even so, as a very marginal and bohemian member of the working-class, his is a very English sort of socialist.[10] In other

words, his socialism derives more from his moral revulsion with capitalist greed and upper-middle-class life-styles than from adherence to a set of ideological positions. In this sense, his answer to the sneeringly put question of what exactly he stands for, "I want everyone to have enough to eat, places to live, jobs to work in", typifies his broad humanism and idealism rather than any resolute political allegiance (Adair, 1989: 65). Still, he is a traditional enough socialist to pay obeisance to Marx and his ideas by reverentially standing in front of his massive bust and grave and reading out loud the epitaph about the need to change the world. For Cyril, however, Marx's "High Hopes", his vision of a classless society, is now merely "pissing in the wind". This idea is forcefully underlined in the cemetery scene by having Cyril and Shirley suddenly surrounded by a group of Japanese tourists, avidly and endlessly taking photographs of the grave. Marx, it seems, has become merely a stop on a package tour, the ideological prestige and influence of his work having dissipated into nothing (Quart & Quart, 1989: 47).

Cyril wants social change but is not sure how to set about getting it. In another telling scene, Cyril and Shirley are visited by a zealously politicised and emotionally chaotic friend, Suzi (Judith Scott), who blazingly, and simplistically, denounces Thatcherism and advocates power for the people. She plans to go to Nicaragua and change the world but Cyril and Shirley appear to have grown out of all that. Cyril softly derides Suzi's "meetings about meetings" and puts down as nonsense her frantic talk of the coming revolution in Britain but, at the same time, he also ruefully admits that he only "sits on his ass and does nothing". Although Suzi does not show up again in the film, her (momentary) appearance in this and the next scene (in the bedroom) is no mere detail in the story. In the first place, an internal, ideological clash is evidently being played out in or through the succession of close-ups of the three friends' faces, their expressions, their silences. By momentarily "pausing" the narrative in this way, it seems that Leigh's goal is to allow viewers time to reflect on what they are being shown. It turns out that Suzi's verbal earnestness, her avowedly revolutionary stance and attempt to persuade her friends is all "surface-talk". Unaware that she has enslaved herself to arbitrary ideas, she does not have the ability to choose among various courses of action. At bottom, she is only someone "playing at" being what she is and deceiving herself in the process. In contrast, the same episode leads Cyril and Shirley to ponder on the meaning of their lives and relationship. Despite his feelings of political despair, Cyril (unlike Suzi) still finds in Marxist ideas a moral centre, an intellectual basis for refusing to fit in to this "new-look England" (Cordaiy, 1989: 47).

The difference thus established between the couple and their irrational guest suggests that judgement is being passed on (empty) rhetorical leftish politics, an

equally harsh condemnation, let it be said, as that lashed out throughout the rest of the film on New Right policies, thoughts and practices.

This said, Leigh does not simply define his main characters in terms of their social and political positions. In his emotionally constricted way, Cyril is portrayed as a tender and gentle man. His warmth is conveyed in his relation to Shirley, with whom he has lived for ten years. They joke, they bicker and talk intimately with each other, and their relationship is helped by their sharing similar social and political values. Interestingly, one of the aspects that stands out most conspicuously in *High Hopes* is the extent to which these lovers are poles apart from the Hollywood ideal of an attractive couple: Shirley is bucktoothed and something of an ugly duckling but the more we get to know her, the more radiant and even beautiful she becomes. She is a warm, kind and loving young woman. She loves plants and flowers and yearns for a child. This does not mean however that she is characterised in any way within broad, conventional "feminine" parameters. She is shown, for instance, to be confident enough to handle on her own Martin's crude, lecherous attempt to come on her sexually.

Of the three couples, Cyril and Shirley are the only ones whom Leigh treats without satiric edge. In contrast, the characterisation of the snobbish couple who live next-door to Ms Bender's council house makes one's hair stand on end. Finding Ms Bender on her door-step, having locked herself out of her home, Laetitia Booth-Braine (whose affected accent and supercilious attitude immediately signal her as pertaining to the growing sector of egotistic, money-minded go-getters) asks the old lady if there are any neighbours who can help her. Such a fiercely uncharitable reaction to the helplessness of an elderly neighbour subtly points to or serves as a metaphor for the disintegration of social relationships. In Thatcher's "new Britain" Ms Bender should fend for herself. A world governed by materialism, competitiveness and enterprise has no room for societal solidarity. The weak and defenceless, like Ms Bender, should remain invisible and not encroach on the lives of the rich and successful. This idea is further amplified by means of a host of revealing behavioural or verbal notations. Examples range from Laetitia's expression of exquisitely pained forbearance when she realises that she will have to harbour the old lady until a set of spare keys can be fetched. Likewise, her bracing "chop chop!" as the aged woman totters up the stairs is profoundly offensive, as is her airily callous, "I'll show you where it is in a minute", when Ms Bender asks, with some urgency, to go to the toilet ("Oh, you mean the lavatory!"). Later, when Laetitia tells her husband Rupert that she has agreed to do some charity work and wants him to donate some cases of champagne, his immediate, irritated response is, "Who are we helping *this* time?" (my emphasis).

An everyday mishap (the lost keys) thus serves to present an iconic confrontation between the two extremes of Ms Thatcher's political legacy. Rebutting the reproach made by several critics concerning the unflattering image of Britain projected in such scenes, Michael Coveney argues in Leigh's defence that, "no film-maker has an obligation to be fair [...] about the society he by rights claims as his material. His only obligation is towards the truth as he perceives it, and Leigh perceived a divided and demoralised nation" (1997: 191). With this in mind, Mike Leigh is not only contrasting the economic and spiritual conditions of the age but, by means of Rupert and Laetitia especially, he is evidently incorporating in the film some of the nastier aspects of "gentrification", that is, the process by which houses in decaying and relatively poor areas of the city are bought by upper-middle-class professionals (Abercrombie & Warde, 2002: 319). For a couple like the Boothe-Braines, a neighbour like Ms Bender is an embarrassment, someone that only lowers the property values on the street. This is the spirit reflected in Laetitia's brisk advice to Cyril's mother to buy her house and then resell. Even though their designer house is a mystery to Ms Bender, and fascinates Valerie who, after having literally gate-crashed into their home, exclaims, "amazing what you can do with a slum!", what the Booth-Braines have done with this traditional working-class property is to show that while all property can rise in value, and class, the same does not necessarily apply to people.

Mike Leigh's venomous parody of the times is further accentuated by his portrayal of the Burkes. Cyril's sister, Valerie, and her husband, Martin, embody that segment of the working-class who identified ideologically with the enterprise culture and thus came to swell the ranks of the new "symbolic majority" (to use Stuart Hall's term) around Thatcher's political project (in Smith, 1994: 41).[11] Martin's thriving business as a second-hand car dealer has enabled them to break out of their humble origins. However, the couple's lack of taste, culture and manners is made painfully evident in their lifestyle and surroundings. As lower-scale "nouveaux riches", they own a house in an outlying district, "designed like a hair-dresser's saloon" (Coveney, 1997: 89) and overstuffed with kitch ornamentals like (to name but a few) the fake log-fire, the decorative brass fruit or the glass chess set (in which the pieces are laid out wrongly). By means of this couple, Leigh thus gives vivid expression to the social pretensions and suburban tastes of a working-class "corrupted" by materialism and consumerism (Hill, 1999:194). Since ostentation has become an end in itself for Valerie, she "sniffs" contemptuously at the Tory couple who live on what, to her, is a mere working-class street. At the same time however, Val strives to emulate the Booth-Braines' life-style and, more particularly, Laetitia's costume and manner: as a consequence, she overdresses and wears too much make-up. On this point, although a critic like Harlan Kennedy (1991: 24) sees the grossly exaggerated traits assigned to the character as proof that

Leigh's comic stereotyping is unrealistic and unconvincing, the truth is that the image of Valerie, lonely, insecure and unloved (with an abusive husband who is constantly on the look-out for other women), filling her anxious days exercising and consuming is poignant enough to make her unforgettable.[12]

This said, different as they may be from one another socially and economically, the Burkes and the Boothe-Braines are, in Carney and Quart's view, basically the same (2002: 184). Both couples see absolutely everything and everyone in terms of their own personal perspectives. Martin, for example, assumes that all women are whores and men entitled to sexual favours, which is why he feels free to proposition Shirley, emotionally abuse his girlfriend, and prey sexually on every woman he meets. As he says at one point, "They're all the bleedin' same".

Valerie is motivated by another kind of generalised understanding of experience. Like Beverley and Lawrence in *Abigail's Party* or Aubrey and Nicola in *Life is Sweet*, she thinks that you can *become* someone simply by having the right possessions, wearing the right clothes, or speaking in the right way. In other words, as she demonstrates in her attempt to "be" Laetitia by mimicking her way of dressing and talking, for Valerie you *are* your clothes and mannerisms.

For their part, Rupert and Laetitia condescendingly treat everyone below their own social class as being indistinguishable from a tradesman. Rupert's remark, "What made this country great was a place for everyone and everyone in his place" unpleasantly recalls the nationalist maxim of bygone Victorian times, repeatedly re-echoed in New Right essentialist views of (white) upper-class Englishness as the timeless core of Britain (Smith, 1994: 70-1).

The consequence of these characters' incapacity to appreciate, recognise or even consider dissimilar life-styles and points of view is the obliteration of differences and the denial of particular, distinct individualities. Thus, instead of being open and responsive to "others" and other attitudes and outlooks, people like Rupert, Laetitia, Valerie and Martin are shown to trim everything and everyone to fit into their *own* tiny emotional and intellectual categories. Rupert and Laetitia, for example, can't even imagine Ms Bender having ideas, feelings and values different from their own. For her part, Valerie can't even conceive that Cyril and Shirley might want to behave differently at the birthday party from the way she thinks they should. Meanwhile, Martin simply treats Valerie, Shirley, and his girlfriend like dirt. Such a rigid, narrow or "closed" conception of life decidedly calls to mind the political/ideological climate of the times. In other words, if attention is fixed or focussed, not on the "text" (that is on fictional individuals), but on "context" or real-life institutions, it then appears that *High Hopes* is Leigh's reply to Thatcher's systematic, impersonal and totalising conception of society, a version that will not admit any kind of divergence and that demands that individuals conform to it.

With this in mind, one way to think of many of the scenes in *High Hopes* is as contrasting the fixed identity or robotic rigidity of those characters who literally "act out" their lives and relationships according to predefined roles and modes of interaction with the openness, flexibility and emotional responsiveness of characters like Cyril and Shirley who show themselves capable of adapting to every circumstance and to everyone who crosses their path.

The most important illustration of Cyril and Shirley's receptivity to different ways of being, feeling and thinking is their openness to each other's differences of opinion and point of view. To put it differently, Cyril and Shirley don't necessarily agree or see things the same way. Their differences can be comical (as when they give Wayne contradictory directions on how to get to the taxi stand), semi-comical (as when they briefly spar over whether they should go to Valerie's party), or deadly serious (as in their feelings about having a child).[13] The important point made in the film is that their differences are never suppressed or hidden but aired, respected and, as far as possible, dealt with.

Leigh invites the viewers to compare Cyril and Shirley's relationship with that of the other two couples by means of three consecutive bedroom scenes.[14] Seeing all these characters either going to bed or in bed enables one to observe how they genuinely interact with each other in the intimacy of the bedroom. The first of these scenes shows the Boothe-Braines on the stairs, engaged in a ridiculously childish sex game: Rupert, the bow-tied wine merchant, is tearing off his clothes while Laetitia in silk under-garments fondles her scrawny teddy bear (ridiculously and tastelessly named "Mr Sausage") as she pretends to be terrified of her husband's sexual advances. A more ex-tensive view of Rupert and Laetitia's imaginative and emotional limitations comes next as they prepare to go to bed after a night out. As against Cyril and Shirley's mutual understanding, fun and continual play-acting in the preliminaries for sex,[15] there is no inventiveness, no good-natured teasing and joking, no mutually responsive and stimulating exchange of emotions. As Carney and Quart observe (2000: 182-3), Rupert and Laetitia's so-called interaction consists of mismatched, nonintersecting pro-nouncements. They don't really listen, let alone respond, to each other. Their "conversation" is closer to being a series of alternating monologues. Their comments (the nature of which is summarised by Rupert's "Two steaks, same day, totally different" and Laetitia's narcissistic "I thank god every day I've been blessed with such beautiful skin: you really are a very lucky boy. You take me for granted") leave no room for a response or reply. They are so wrapped up in their *own* private worlds that they might be talking to themselves. There is no communication here. The couple is thus shown to be as emotionally estranged from each other as in their relation to others. This fact is trivially expressed by the iciness of Laetitia's tone, scolding Rupert for not remembering the plot of the opera they have just attended; by the stasis of her

physical position, lying in bed with cucumber slices on her eyes, and her reference to the coldness of Rupert's hands.

Just as with the other couples, night-time also implies sexual role-playing games for Valerie and Martin. However, again here, one appreciates an evident contrast between their love-making and the fluidity and harmony in Cyril and Shirley's creative, fun-making improvisations. Apart from being utterly grotesque, the rules set by Valerie, "You're Michael Douglas [...] I'm a virgin", demonstrate that there is nothing personal or original in her way of interacting sexually with her husband. Rather like her treatment of identity as something acquirable (the way she thinks she can acquire Laetitia's identity if she wears the right clothes) her sexual fantasy is derivative, involving *imitating* the roles of popular Hollywood actors. Close ups of her, eyes closed and body contorted in what she imagines to be alluring readiness ("Nah, *you* begin"), provoke nothing but boredom on Martin's part, and thus make up the knife-twisting comedy that, according to John Pym (1989: 10) Mike Leigh has made his own over the years.

Valerie's apotheosis as a comic-pathetic character is the gaudy birthday party that she forces on her reluctant mother and where she toasts her by blurting out that "it could be her last!" Here again, Valerie sets the rules and directs the "surprise" party in such a way that the surprise, the party, and the interest all disappear. Instead of a welcoming hostess, she functions as a kind of dictator who refuses to tolerate the least deviation from her pre-established plan.[16] Since she has decided *how* her family should play their roles, she treats them as puppets whose movements and reactions she can control. In other words, rather than letting the people she has brought together spontaneously exhibit their feelings and attitudes, she forces them to play their parts according to *her* conception of them. This said, if what is (re)presented in the film as a tragi-comic family-scene is magnified and transposed to the reality of the eighties, one can begin to appreciate a deadly subtle depiction of Thatcher's intolerance towards and dominance over anyone defined as the "other" (be the "other" the Argentinians, the EC, trades unions, nationalists or riotous immigrants). As Stuart Hall claims in "Blue Election, Election Blues", this was one of the prime ways in which the new Conservatism of the eighties came to exert "hegemony" over people's attitudes and aspirations (1988: 259-67). And yet, for all her attempts to manipulate other people's thoughts and actions to suit her own pre-conceived designs, Valerie evidently has little of the skills of statesmanship. As a consequence, the family gathering ends up in general chaos and cacophony, rather like *Abigail's Party*, with tearful, drunken Valerie retreating to the bathroom with her dog. In this respect, even though the scene does seem to go somewhat over the top, it nevertheless succeeds in being one of the most pointedly funny and emotionally moving episodes in the film, its only "happy" result being that it finally brings Cyril and Shirley closer to Ms Bender.

Cyril's mother is undoubtedly one of the most convincing characters in the film. She is a working-class widow who has little relation with her children or anybody else in the world. Leigh's camera looks at this isolated woman, and conveys the struggle of her walk as well as the dignity and wear of her face (the film doesn't even turn away from her removing her dentures). Under the camera's careful scrutiny, her seemingly morose and/or uncomprehending silences turn out to show full understanding (and therefore hurt) of what is being said around her. Even so, there is no sentimentalising of the working-class in this portrayal. In a short but telling scene, Leigh subtly uses Mrs Bender to express the nature of British white, working-class, racist attitudes. At the chemist's, the old woman rattles on accusingly about having been robbed, while the camera captures the fear-filled eyes and retreating movement of the young black female shop-assistant. And yet, as with all Leigh's characters, Ms Bender is not presented as an entirely negative character. She is such a depressed and pathetic person that we are just as surprised as Cyril and Shirley are when she says that the wool shawl they have just given her for her birthday is "nice".

The film's final scene sees Cyril and Shirley taking the old woman up on the roof of their building to show her their garden (a few plants near a chimney stack) and point out the sights of London, including King's Cross where, Cyril reminds her, "dad worked". Ms Bender is amazed by the vision of the city from such a height, remarking that it must be "the top of the world" (while what the camera ironically shows us are two enormous gas tanks in the distance).[17] Ultimately, therefore, it could be argued that the tone of the film is not one of despair, but rather of optimism in the face of seemingly impossible odds. However flawed the family might be, perhaps after all it *is* worth something; and perhaps in these acquisitive times, and despite the ascendancy of the appalling Burkes and the Boothe-Braines, there *are* worthwhile family-duties such as the care of the old and the nurture of children (Pym, 1989: 10).[18] Then again, one should be wary of such a simple, straightforward (and almost sentimental) reading of the film's resolution —an interpretation that assumes too readily that Leigh's text offers a transparent surface upon which we may discern its (true) meaning. As mentioned above, it is here — in the question of the relations between discourses and the realities they purport to represent— that cultural critics locate the question of ideology (Grossberg, 1997:136-7). In Hall's view, for instance, because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text or practice or event, the ideology of this text, practice or event is not "guaranteed" in any way. In practice, this opens the possibility of "articulating" a reading of Leigh's family drama as less resistant to dominant conservative ideology than it first appears to be. Put simply: in celebrating the virtues of the privatised family, *High Hopes* —for all its apparent leftist, defiant dramatisation of current trends— appears to end up *reinforcing* the very scepticism

about more collective (or "socialist") forms of political action so prominently featured in conservative ideology. On this reading, the film's mood is decidedly more pessimistic, confirming as it does the hegemonic paranoia about the Left and the Left 's traditional grand solutions instigated by Thatcher and conservative government members throughout the eighties.

To conclude. Given that films are, by now, the most prominent form of publicly consumed art, their force as sites for interpreting *Culture* is undeniable. This said, the choice of a cultural studies' lens for the discussion of Mike Leigh's film *High Hopes* has been determined by Stuart Hall's concern to think of culture politically. From there the "radical contextualisation" of the film as a "text" whose meaning is both connected to and conditioned by context. In this respect, although the subject matter of *High Hopes* may seem utterly prosaic —ordinary people doing ordinary things— it is nevertheless deadly serious, "articulating" as it does a vivid reality. The film centres on Cyril and Shirley, two ungainly, left-wing relics of an earlier era. Through them, we get to meet the embarrassingly awful Valerie (Cyril's sister) and her husband Martin. Both are caricatures of the offensively loud, vulgar, Tory-voting sector of the working-class that have more money than sense. When one day, Cyril and Valerie's mother locks herself out of her home, the whole family is brought into contact with Ms Bender's next-door neighbours, the Thatcherite yuppies, Laetitia and Rupert, whose values evidently exclude compassion, consideration and generosity. By thus interweaving the "stories" of three different couples, Mike Leigh allows a political dimension to creep in, encouraging us to apprehend (and reject) the cultural "barbarity" associated with the economic beneficiaries of Thatcherism. He does this by contrasting Cyril and Shirley's receptiveness to different ways of being, feeling and thinking with the Burkes' and Boothe-Braines' patronising knowingness, lack of tolerance and spiritual emptiness. By thus calling attention to the failures of communication and connection of couples and families, the film succeeds in expressing values of care and responsibility which cut across the prevailing ethos of Thatcherism. Indeed, while Thatcherism is hardly explicit as a theme in the film, its spirit and inheritance is nevertheless a key presence, both as the target of Leigh's excruciatingly sharp criticisms and in the text's conformist upholding of the traditional nuclear family. For this reason, a film like *High Hopes* is for cultural studies a site of ideological struggle —a terrain of resistance *and* capitulation. Even so, *High Hopes* is a strikingly powerful film that combines a biting sense of humour with a true-to-life look at the social consequences of the impelling, money-making, culture of the times. In sum, for all its humour and caricature, Leigh's film is, at bottom, a sad comment on the sickly state of Britain.

Notes

[1]. The research for this paper has been financed by the DGICT thanks to the research project:245-87. I would also like to thank my colleague Celestino Deleyto for his helpful comments on and critiques of this essay.

[2]. The central point here is that upon their arrival in Spain, cultural studies underwent a kind of mutation as they joined existing academic concerns with issues of race, gender, sexuality, identity etc., eventually being forced to capitulate to the disciplinary-based organisation of knowledge and text-bound imperatives of the Spanish university.

[3]. The first service to be privatised was the telephone, then followed gas, electricity, water, coal, British Railways etc. (Elles, 1987: 100-103).

[4]. The most commonly used method of measuring poverty (adopted by the EU and the British government) counts as "poor" those whose income falls below fifty per cent of average income. According to the British government's *Households Below Average Income* measure, poverty is shown to have increased substantially during the last two decades of the twentieth century, from 9 per cent of the population in 1979 to 24 per cent in 1995/6 (Abercrombie & Warde, 2002:124).

[5]. On heritage cinema see especially Higson (1993; 1996; 1997; 2000;)

[6]. On Ken Loach's films see for instance, García Brusco (1996); Petley (1992); de Giusti (1999).

[7]. After the making of *Bleak Moments* (1971), most of Leigh's screen work was done for television, where he established a strong reputation for a very particular approach to filmmaking. Like his compatriots Ken Loach and Stephen Frears, Leigh had already built up a remarkable body of television work years before he became known to a wider international audience. Some of his memorable TV films include *Nuts in May* (1976), *Abigail's Party* (1977), *Grown-ups* (1980), *Home Sweet Home* (1982), *Meantime* (1983) and *Four days in July* (1985). Although, since the release of *High Hopes* (which was followed by features films such as *Life is Sweet* [1990], *Naked* [1993], the international success of *Secrets and Lies* [1996], *Career Girls* [1997] and *Topsy-Turvy* [1999]), Mike Leigh is now better known than he was formerly. His dedication to television work is probably the reason why he is virtually ignored in most accounts of British cinema.

[8]. Michael Coveney (1997: 189) relates how, during the filming, cooperation from the "gentrified" neighbourhood in Islington was so unforthcoming that Leigh and his crew had to move down to Bethnal Green to find the two adjacent houses, one privately owned by the stuck up, opera-loving, Boothe-Braines, the other Ms Bender's.

[9]. Wayne apparently left home after a row with his mother; he went out and bought pork pies instead of steak and kidney pies.

[10]. The Labour party was formed in 1901.What mostly distinguished the British left from radical parties in other European countries was that it emanated more from humanitarian ideals or a pragmatic response to poverty and the conditions of working-class life than from Marxist ideology (Thompson, 1981: 150-156).

[11]. In "Blue Election, Election Blues" (1988: 259-67), Stuart Hall emphasises that material interests are important factors in the choices between political projects. Thus, elections are not won or lost on so-called "real" majorities, made up by a clearly defined class or social bloc. In effect, through the

eighties, Thatcherism received the support of a very diffuse, ever-changing "symbolic" or "imaginary" majority, that included at times "many people in the underclasses, the unskilled, part-timers, young, unemployed, women living alone, black people, the homeless, inner-city casualties" (1988: 264). According to their circumstances and aspirations, members of these social groups would vote Tory either because there was no convincing alternative to the established Conservative political project or as a means of bettering their situation, securing their own material interests and social positions.

[12]. Hill comments that, as with many of Leigh's heroines, the three young female characters in *High Hopes* are all childless. He associates Valerie's and Laetitia's childlessness with the "sterility" of the values they represent (1999: 197-8). Whereas the Boothe-Braines are portrayed as having only one ambition in life —succeeding economically and accumulating goods (designer house, the Saab, the country residence)— Valerie screens her unhappiness at her failure to become a mother in the love she devotes to her pet dog (a pedigree Hafgan) significantly called "Baby". It is also interesting to note that, as occurs in both *Meantime* and *Secrets and Lies,* a woman's inability to have a child is associated with an obsessive interest in home decoration and furnishings.

[13]. Throughout the film, Cyril is dead set against having a child, not only because "families fuck you up" but because "no one give a shit what sort of world [...] kids are [...] born into".

[14]. As Leigh himself explained in an interview, the three consecutive bedroom scenes were not part of the initial structure of the film but something that came from the actors' analysis and research into their characters (Ruchti, 1989: 22).

[15]. On this point Carney and Quart (2000: 188-189) depict at length what they call the "died with the boots on" bedroom scene which shows, in a five-minute sequence, the many emotional shifts and tonal adjustments Cyril and Shirley are capable of displaying in their sexual play. Shirley begins by wittily casting Cyril and herself as characters in a Western. After many rapid, improvised scenarios, ranging for the humorous to the macho-stance, Shirley ends up adopting a motherly attitude, playing "this little piggy went to market" on Cyril's toes.

[16]. In this respect, Valerie very much recalls Beverley, the monstrously insensitive hostess of *Abigail's Party,* who trips about her lounge, compels her guests to listen to her favourite Demis Roussos's album and forces unwanted gin-and-tonics on her polite neighbour Sue.

[17]. As Leonard and Barbara Quart point out (1989: 47), the concluding image somewhat recalls those late fifties' and sixties' realist English films like *This Sporting Life* where the working-class hero is shown standing on a hill staring down at the town and a world that figuratively imprisoned him. In a similar manner, this ironic, "top of the world" view of London can be interpreted as an iconographic "comment" on the unlikelihood of British society —so riven with avarice and inequity and dominated by the politics of Thatcher— ever being transformed in accord with Cyril's high hopes.

[18]. At this point, Cyril's adamant views concerning the irresponsibility of bringing children into this unjust world have given way to a more yielding attitude towards both the imperfections of society and the possibility of parenthood.

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THE ANXIETY OF BEING POSTCOLONIAL: IDEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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In a recent essay that begins by recording the joy of returning home, the Sri Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai talks about his decision to return, together with his male partner, for an extended visit to Colombo.[1] The description begins along conventional lines (large mansions, curious but well-meaning relatives, sumptuous meals), but the idyllic trip is interrupted one night by security forces, ostensibly searching for Tamil Tigers.[2] Selvadurai's instinctive response to the presence of the soldiers outside the house is to rush into his bedroom and remove all things that would indicate that he was sharing a room with his partner. Before the security personnel could enter the room, everything that pointed to his partner's presence in the room had been removed. "Defagging" is what he calls the process. It was for Selvadurai a moment of considerable anxiety, not because he was a Tamil or because he could be suspected of having links with militants, but because he was gay. In this instance, ethnicity and political opinion gave way to sexual orientation as a signifier of otherness. Someone who had written a novel that was clear about its political stance would normally expect a very different motive for the visit, a backlash from an unforgiving state. Given the political message of his first novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), it would have been totally reasonable for the author to fear some reprisal from the government.[3] But the soldiers were not there to interrogate a subversive author. They were on a routine check or were investigating complaints about a gay couple.

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THE ANXIETY OF BEING POSTCOLONIAL: IDEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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In a recent essay that begins by recording the joy of returning home, the Sri Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai talks about his decision to return, together with his male partner, for an extended visit to Colombo.[1] The description begins along conventional lines (large mansions, curious but well-meaning relatives, sumptuous meals), but the idyllic trip is interrupted one night by security forces, ostensibly searching for Tamil Tigers.[2] Selvadurai's instinctive response to the presence of the soldiers outside the house is to rush into his bedroom and remove all things that would indicate that he was sharing a room with his partner. Before the security personnel could enter the room, everything that pointed to his partner's presence in the room had been removed. "Defagging" is what he calls the process. It was for Selvadurai a moment of considerable anxiety, not because he was a Tamil or because he could be suspected of having links with militants, but because he was gay. In this instance, ethnicity and political opinion gave way to sexual orientation as a signifier of otherness. Someone who had written a novel that was clear about its political stance would normally expect a very different motive for the visit, a backlash from an unforgiving state. Given the political message of his first novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), it would have been totally reasonable for the author to fear some reprisal from the government.[3] But the soldiers were not there to interrogate a subversive author. They were on a routine check or were investigating complaints about a gay couple.

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The moment drives home what has become increasingly common in countries where the author's role has taken on a new dimension. Selvadurai himself comments: "A home in Sri Lanka after 18 years in exile: I should have been euphoric. But this new home had come too late". His disappointment is personal, not political or ethnic. How this moment of anxiety would play itself out in his future writing is left to be seen, but this episode underscores the location of the writer, whose personal life may not necessarily be a metonym for collectivity or whose predicament may not correspond to familiar markers. As postcolonial nations respond to a complex historical legacy by adopting shifting and often paradoxical positions, authors too feel the need to respond in ways that are equally indeterminate. Selvadurai's moment of panic underscores the ambivalence of postcolonial authorship in recent years. Nationality, belonging, text, author, and individual intersect in significant ways to produce recognition, fame, and also, at times, a measure of anxiety. The author is not necessarily a marginalized individual, but it is no longer safe to assume that he or she reflects the voice of the majority. In fact, it is possible to go even further and claim that the notion of a majoritarian perspective is in itself problematic.

This paper is an inquiry into or a meditation on an aspect of postcolonial studies that has become increasingly apparent in recent times: a kind of anxiety that is a consequence of new positions and perspectives and has resulted in what might well be a sub-genre of postcolonial writing. "Anxiety" here refers to the state of mind that Ashutosh Varshney refers to as a fear of the unknown, or as a loss of absolute certainties.[4] To be sure of one's convictions is to write in a particular mode: realism, satire, allegory and fable, for example, involve a corresponding socio-political context. The kind of ambivalence caused by anxiety has no corresponding mode. In such works, there has been no break with convention, no startling innovation that one might readily identify as new and experimental. But there has been, in certain contexts, and among certain authors, a shift in emphasis, a desire to rethink their own writing styles and their own subject matter in ways that signal to the reader a point of departure. The signs have been there-when, for instance, *The God of Small Things* (1999), was critiqued for its moral and political message, and when the author responded by defending her position and by writing a very different kind of book.[5] When, a few years ago, Amitav Ghosh refused to be a contender for the Commonwealth Prize, the issue again was one of uneasiness, of being confronted with a new set of concerns within a postcolonial frame.[6] It is anxiety rather than fear or defiance or subversion that defines this particular kind of otherness. Postcolonial anxieties take different forms, and their manifestations tend to be dissimilar. Neocolonial specificities are such that generalizations have become increasingly difficult. But authors, like critics and scholars, are confronted with conditions that result in a feeling of anxiety.

The notion of the writer being an outsider is a commonplace in postcolonial writing. In the Philippines, in Singapore, in Sri Lanka and in South Africa, where there has been a history of violence and unrest, state-sponsored or otherwise, censorship has been a major factor. Inevitably, writers have responded by creating texts that circumvented state control. Writers who located themselves in diasporic contexts have been relatively free to write without inhibitions. Those who chose to remain had the choice of pretending that there was no cause for protest, or of subverting the dictates of censorship through means that gave them a measure of safety. Some form of allegory characterized much of the work that came out of the Philippines under the Marcos regime.[7] Writing in Singapore continues to find ways of indirection to this day to avoid the possibility of offending the state. Those who choose not to comply, in Singapore or elsewhere, often pay the price for their foolhardiness.[8] Either way, the terms of the opposition are clear: one is either inside the whale or outside it, as George Orwell and Salman Rushdie have shown, in different ways.[9]

The binarism that characterized such situations no longer applies in quite the same way in countries such as South Africa or Sri Lanka, where censorship does not announce its presence. Writers are free to write what they want without state intervention. And yet what was once relatively straightforward as political choice has become far more complex. The dichotomy between ruler and militant, for instance, in countries such as Sri Lanka, has become blurred with international intervention and some measure of legitimacy given to so-called secessionists. During the last few years, a peace process, brokered by Norway, has been under way in Sri Lanka, and the fact that Norway speaks both to the government and the militant group establishes the legitimacy of the latter. Very few contemporary writers would adopt a straightforward binarism to characterize the present context in Sri Lanka. In such situations, one almost feels the need for a new vocabulary, a new grammar of sorts, to address the new political reality. It is still possible for the author to adopt a specific stance, but he or she must do that with the awareness that such decisions are bound to be controversial. The issues have not lost their urgency, but positions have become more ambivalent. The anxiety is not always about reprisal but about a genuine difficulty in resolving the complexity of the problem. In South Africa, for example, the anxiety manifests itself in a particular way. The white author occupies an extremely problematic space within the new framework of power. Authority, legitimacy, subjectivity, and affiliation have become contested sites. Not only has the political situation become complex, but the author's identity as an individual does not stand outside the field itself. Where the boundaries of nation and race have not been resolved, the writers are painfully aware that to espouse any particular stance might well be counterproductive. Where their legitimacy is not a given, authors may choose a middle path, with the

knowledge that any one perspective is not likely to encapsulate the entire truth. In India, the anxiety might well take on a particular slant. Since the mid-1980s the rise of Hindu nationalism has been a major concern for the nation. The extent to which it has been addressed in literature would be an interesting area of inquiry. Thus the postcolonial predicament might well be a particular kind of ambivalence, caused as much by globalization and the need to withstand scrutiny by an international community, as by a shift in local conditions towards heterogeneity.

Diaspora is no longer a refuge for the authors in quite the same way it was years ago. While diaspora has facilitated access to major publishers and an impersonal readership, it is often important for writers to be able to return "home" in order to write about the countries they once left. Whether it is for research or to satisfy a yearning and nostalgia for home, some measure of legitimacy is associated with physical access to "home". Fijian writers such as Satendra Nandan routinely visit the country they fled from. Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth have chosen to live in India. Rushdie has a house in India, even if he does not choose to live there. Vikram Chandra and Allan Sealy divide their time between India and outside. These writers may well publish in the West, but home certainly plays a constitutive role in ways it did not two decades ago. Governments too are now more mindful of international pressures and are less inclined to impose censorship than they did ten years ago. In any event, censorship tends to be less effective in a globalized world. But the writer is conscious that such privileges are carefully monitored, and to be seen as an enemy of the state or of a particular group that enjoys a measure of power is hardly a comfortable location. The middle space is not so much of compromise as ambivalence, of recognizing that moral and ethical boundaries are difficult to define. It is possible to argue that political and cultural contexts have always been complex. While one cannot dispute the truth of that claim, it does not negate the fact that the competing claims in the present make a moral high ground difficult to occupy.

The position is as urgent for writers as it is for scholars and journalists who are conscious of negotiating very difficult territory. The opposition to Romila Thapar's appointment to the Library of Congress is a case in point of how state ideology works in subtle or straightforward ways to drive home what is acceptable. Although she did get the appointment eventually and chose to accept it, the barrage of criticism she and the Library of Congress faced is a measure of changing perspectives. In this particular instance, there was no active national intervention, but a large number of people were unhappy that she was given the research chair.[10] The university curriculum, the criteria for publications, reviews, are all part of an interlocking system that places the scholar in a curious situation of safeguarding freedom of writing and of being conscious that one's career in research is at least partially influenced by state ideology.

The writer's situation can hardly be discussed within a totalizing framework. Selvadurai's predicament arises out of his sexual orientation. J.M. Coetzee's situation, for example, is a racial one in which it is difficult to espouse certain positions without being scrutinized carefully for racial bias. The history of South Africa and the dismantling of apartheid have created a context in which certain issues have taken on a new resonance. It is possible to argue that his stance vis-à-vis apartheid has been clear from the beginning. He was always an outspoken critic of apartheid and injustice. In fact all his major works are about the inhumanity of an unjust political system. But his location has now changed. The cause he championed does not need the kind of endorsement that he provided. His emphasis on textuality and aesthetic distance might well appear old-fashioned and reactionary. Where he locates himself is often a more urgent question than what he stands for. Issues of subjectivity and agency have become important for complex reasons. For Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunesekera, both diasporic writers, the issue might well be one of wanting to participate actively in the political scene without stating a clear position. Here again, there is a difference between the two, although they are both Sri Lankan authors. Gunesekera has always been involved in politics, at least nominally in his works. Curiously enough, it is in his most recent novel, *Heaven's Edge* (2002), that the anxiety about what to say and how to say it becomes apparent. Ondaatje, on the other hand, stayed away from Sri Lanka, literally and otherwise, apart from a few visits and a very personal memoir of sorts.[11] Gradually he found himself drawn to Sri Lanka and in fact used the Booker Prize money to set up a fund for an annual prize for the best writer from the country. It is thus a logical step for him to confront the issues that have obsessed the country for two decades in his novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

It is a matter of considerable interest that *Anil's Ghost* has been looked at carefully by critics for signs of ethnic bias. Many of the articles written by Sri Lankan scholars have identified some form of communal bias that, according to the critics, place the author on one side or the other of the ideological divide.[12] Ondaatje himself has stated, both in an interview and in his Governor General's Prize acceptance speech that he was not interested in taking sides. To argue for peace was what he considered important. "'Pacifism', 'reconciliation', 'forgiveness' are easily mocked and dismissed words. But only those principles will save us" says Ondaatje.[13] And yet, the novel itself appears to problematise the political issues in remarkably new ways. The presence of multiple narratives that intersect in the text signals a new consciousness in Ondaatje, as it does in a number of authors. It is possible to argue that the whole story of Palipana is an allegory for the dilemma of the author who must lie in order to express the truth. Palipana as epigraphist was valorized when he came across as anti-imperialist. The moment he shifts his perspective and "imagines" realities that history has suppressed, he becomes a traitor and an

impostor. Palipana's predicament is not unlike that of the author whose rise to fame is watched carefully, whose writing must negotiate a middle ground between essentialism and state ideology. The epigraphist chooses a Buddha-like withdrawal to avoid the public gaze, but that stance is hardly available to the author who cannot evade the issues or confront them with any degree of certainty.

Anil's Ghost does not distance itself from the realities of political unrest. In fact, it is quite graphic in its description of brutality and violence. But its mode allows for a measure of distance. Apart from the acceptance speech, the author inserts himself in the text with a prefatory note that is signed "M.O." The narrator, however, is not the author and the multiple narratives in the text destabilize the notion of a univocal narrative voice. Multiple perspectives are inserted into the text deliberately to preempt political bias. Ondaatje, one is inclined to think, is not interested in sitting on the fence. At the same time, he is aware that truth is a matter of perspective. It is possible to withdraw physically, as Palipana does, by retreating to the forest, but the retreat is never complete. Metaphors allow for multiplicity, but they cannot function without some link to the referent. The significance of *Anil's Ghost* is not that Ondaatje finally writes a novel about Sri Lanka, but that he writes in a manner that reveals a deep anxiety about its past and present history. It is possible to argue that *Anil's Ghost* is a profoundly truthful political novel largely because its political stance resolutely avoids didacticism.

For literary studies, the issue might be posed in the following manner: what kind of narrative mode would writers choose to adopt in situations that require political engagement without a clear bias? Literary history demonstrates that new forms and genres have emerged when new positions needed to be expressed. Does the contemporary scene necessitate a struggle with prevalent modes? Various "isms" such as postmodernism and magic realism have played a constitutive role in demonstrating the experimental gestures of contemporary writing. They often point to a kind of opaqueness in the material that needed to be sifted in order to perceive forms of corruption or oppression. Now the material itself poses problems.

For the most part, such texts seem to work with some version of realism, although realism *per se* is probably less conducive to the kind of ambivalence that such narratives seek to express. In this respect, *Disgrace* (2000) is probably a useful text to consider carefully. It is a novel that is framed by another text that is presented as a version of realism. The previous text, namely *The Lives of Animals* (1999), then, serves as an intertextual frame for a text that shifts emphasis away from the social context to the character. *Disgrace* is a character-driven novel that only intermittently touches on the political scene. The novel provides enough by way of information to remind the reader that the concerns are larger than that of straightforward social realism. But its ambivalence is a measure of the anxiety of

the author and the predicament of the Afrikaaner in South Africa. It is the anxiety of realizing that the middle position is not tenable, although that is probably the position that is available. *Disgrace* is often misread —that in itself is a sign of a nascent form that has not been adequately identified. Quite often Coetzee's lectures are in the form of narratives, where critic and author seem to merge. And the lecture/fiction may well take the form of a dialogue that displaces traditional certainties.

It is important to recognize that *Disgrace* is primarily concerned with the misdemeanor of a professor who abuses his power by having sexual relations with a student. While it would be absurd to overstate the point, it is nonetheless relevant that the author is himself a professor. In a distant manner, the relation between author and character is established in the novel. While the inquiry that follows the accusation of rape can be related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is equally important that it should provide the occasion for Professor Lurie to discuss the pitfalls of assuming that truth can be arrived at through conventional means. Lurie is willing to accept guilt, but he refuses to admit repentance. As he puts it, "repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (58). As Lurie struggles not only against the University, but also against the world that his daughter inhabits, the moral binarism of the novel becomes destabilized and complex. Lurie as stand-in for the author figure expresses the anxiety of involvement and detachment. He resigns his post to avoid a lengthy inquiry, but finds himself involved in a situation that is no less difficult to resolve. Lurie's recognition that narratives are difficult to articulate echoes the postcolonial author's struggle to find an adequate narrative mode. The very fact that Lurie's daughter is reluctant to relate her tale of rape is a metaphor for the multiplicity of the context. The ostensible simplicity of *Disgrace*, compared to Coetzee's previous fiction is, in a curious way, a manifestation of an anxiety that cannot easily be understood.

Ondaatje's position is similar with some important differences. If he occupies a position of privilege, it is because he is a diasporic author championed and sustained by the West. When he first wrote about Sri Lanka, he retreated to a private space by talking about his own family. *Running in the Family* (1982) is satirical, irreverent, apolitical and even impressionistic. Critics have blamed the author for appropriating and essentialising Sri Lanka in order to cater to a Western readership. Twenty years later, such a book would have been far more difficult to write. To engage directly with the political scene would be to take sides and reveal a bias, which probably does not exist in the author's mind. Although *Anil's Ghost* has encountered a fair amount of criticism for its political stance, the fact remains that the author is more interested in staging, in laying bare the subtleties of history and historiography than in suggesting an unalterable truth. The teleology of the novel

is in striking contrast to some of his previous works, which are more self-consciously counterrealistic. *Anil's Ghost* works with structures only to destablize them, and in the process show that there are many sides, all equally valid. The novel carefully steers clear of elitism in order to project a vision that is deeply troubling.

Gunesekera's *Reef* (1992), which was short listed for the Booker Prize, was distinguished by its capacity for detail, for the meticulous care with which certain motifs were projected in the novel. Sri Lanka in the novel is a real presence, and the author/narrator's stance regarding politics and the environment is equally unequivocal. Compare that with his recent novel *Heaven's Edge*, and the two books might have been written by two different authors. The latter is ostensibly allegorical, with the difference that the allegory is constantly interrupted by a form of signposting that reminds the reader of the referent. The notion of an outsider who can no longer remain on the outside but is equally troubled by the terms within which the local operates is crucial to the novel. The fact that reviewers have identified *Heaven's Edge* as fantasy, fable, magic realism, and science fiction underscores the contention that a new form may well be emerging in postcolonial writing. It is even possible to argue that despite its obvious merits, *Heaven's Edge* has lagged behind *Reef* in popularity precisely because its form is unfamiliar and its political stance deliberately unclear. Ondaatje and Gunesekera deal with the same context but in two different ways. But both depict characters who feel the need to intervene, who must undertake a quest, and what they do has consequences that make a safe middle ground impossible. Gunesekera's work is much closer to allegory than Ondaatje's novel, but the allegory remains on the edge of referentiality to the point that the reader recognizes similarity without direct equivalence.

All these novels that are framed by a measure of anxiety appear to have characteristics that one might identify as experimental, postmodern or counterrealistic. They serve the purpose of drawing attention to the artifice of the text. In Gunesekera it might well be more apparent than in Coetzee, but both employ strategies that suggest a movement away from conventional realism. However, it is possible that these strategies tap into the subjectivity of the reader and serve the function of drawing the reader into the experience rather than providing a distance. In a curious way, the postmodern impulse of defamiliarization is employed to reinforce the urgency and emotional investment of the text. If we were to think of this body of writing as a possible sub-genre, then one of its defining characteristics might well be this curious juxtaposition: the impulse to distance and to remain subjectively involved. This marks a movement away from the experimentation of writers such as Rushdie or the realism of earlier writers such Chinua Achebe.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a particular kind of writing exemplified in the works of, say, Achebe, Patrick White, V.S. Naipaul and Anita Desai. There were significant differences among them, but there was also a consciousness about the end of Empire. It was thus possible for critics to speculate about their work along holistic lines. In some of the pioneering critical studies such as W.H. New's *Among Worlds* (1975) and *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft et al., there is an implicit acknowledgment of common ground, despite shifts in emphases. In the 1980s with Rushdie there is a point of departure. *Midnight's Children* borrowed from many different sources, but it was in some senses an Indian text, responding to trends that were identifiably Indian. Admittedly, Alfred Yuson in the Philippines, Peter Carey in Australia and Ben Okri in England wrote along similar lines, but the differences between them were clearly discernible.[14] Now political concerns and literary histories have moved further apart, requiring a critical practice that is mindful of specificities. The present time is one in which a greater anxiety confronts authors, particularly in countries where the fault lines are more difficult to detect. What does it mean to belong to a particular race, ethnic group, or religion within the framework of an ambivalent national imaginary? One consequence, in literary terms, is the forging of new modes that respond to complex anxieties.

A further example of this phenomenon might be a recent novel entitled *A Hamilton Case* (2003) by Michelle de Krester. Apart from the specificities of the novel itself, it is possible to argue that among some of the diasporic writers, particularly second-generation authors, the anxiety is likely to manifest itself in yet another way.[15] For them, home is defined at least partially by memory rather than lived experience. In their writing, the root metaphors (to use Dipankar Gupta's phrase) are often absent.[16] What they know, they have learnt in a particular kind of way. And when they write, something of that is reflected in the shape of the narrative itself. It does not necessarily relate to de Krester's novel, but it certainly has a bearing on the general argument of this paper.

de Krester's novel moves to the 1930s, a maneuver that suggests a measure of guardedness about the material. The present is invoked regularly to announce the novel's relevance, but the narrative itself goes back in time. More significantly, it is structured in a manner that brings together multiple narratives that both defamiliarize and absorb the reader. The otherness of the text stops short of exoticising the material while remaining on the margins of mainstream political or cultural life. The characters are depicted in minute detail but they are not by any stretch representative. There is a newness about this mode of writing that is both reminiscent of the past without imitating what is now seen as essentialist or exotic. The text itself quotes Friedrich Durrenmatt: "Reality can only be partially attacked by logic" (91), thereby drawing attention to the limitations of the mode of detection that furthers the plot of the novel.

The notion of anxiety is not peculiar to writing in English. In various ways it manifests itself in vernacular writing, although for vernacular writers geographical dislocation is not a factor in the writing process. For the most part, vernacular writers tend to be local rather than diasporic, although it is possible to argue that the situation is beginning to change. And it is not only fiction, but poetry and drama that are affected by the kinds of pressures that problematize the role of the writer. It is conceivable that as writers confront and resolve the anxieties of this new space, a new poetics for this body of writing will emerge. Suffice it to mention that some of the tropes that we are familiar with —the writer as chronicler, as teacher, as critic or even as trickster— may not be the only ones that are adequate for contemporary times. A new anxiety may well define what writers write and how they write them. Some measure of anxiety did exist, in one form of shape, in literary history, but it is necessary to recognize and contextualize contemporary postcolonial experience in order to reflect on what could well be a sub-genre of writing. As W.H. Auden puts it, appropriately, in the poem, "The Age of Anxiety":

> The Primary Colours
> Are all mixed up; the whole numbers
> Have broken down, the big situations
> Ceased to excite (328).

Notes

[1]. The essay entitled "Coming Out" appeared in 1993 in *Time* magazine. For the text of the article see http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/journey/sri_lanka.html

[2]. The Tigers is a popular term for the Liberation Tigers of Tami Eelam, a major militant group among the Tamils in Sri Lanka that has been involved, for the past two decades, in a struggle for some form of secession or regional autonomy.

[3]. The novel has two major foci: the narrator's growing consciousness about his gay sexuality and the violence against the Tamils during the riots of 1983. The author is candid about his condemnation of the government that turned a blind eye to the violence.

[4]. Varshney uses the term in a slightly different manner, but his essay is a valuable attempt to look at the political situation in India through the lens of anxiety.

[5]. Roy's book was critiqued for many reasons, but not for her treatment of caste, as one would normally expect, since the novel is predominantly concerned with inter-caste relationships. The critical responses, an example of which is the review that appeared in *Frontline*, objected to her treatment of the Communist Party of Kerala. Another charge against her was for producing obscene material. Roy's response was to write a book that established her social activism. It is also significant that she has not written another novel after her first work of fiction. The determination to pursue her social activism, her movement to another genre of writing, and even her failure to write another novel may well be reflections of a kind of anxiety that one did not encounter when positions were more clear cut.

[6]. After having won the regional prize, Amitav Ghosh decided to withdraw his name from the contenders for the Commonwealth Prize. In a letter to the Commonwealth Committee, he expressed his reservations about the exclusivity of the prize that considered only writing in English and also about the political overtones of the term "Commonwealth". Here the anxiety of complicity is personal and to some extent abstract. See http://www.ezipangu.org/english/contents/news/forward/3/2.html

[7]. Literature was one of the major casualties of the Marcos regime. A number of writers chose not to write while the others sought out ways of getting their message across indirectly.

[8]. Salman Rushdie and Richard de Zoysa (Sri Lanka) for instance, were affected by their failure to conform. Rushdie had the *fatwa* decreed against him and de Zoysa was murdered.

[9]. For an interesting discussion read "Outside the Whale" in Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1992).

[10]. For a comprehensive account of the different perspectives, see http://www.himalmag.com/2003/june/analysis_2.htm

[11]. The memoir entitled *Running in the Family*, written in 1982, adopts an irreverent, apolitical stance that is a far cry from the political engagement of his recent novel. If one were to think of *Anil's Ghost* as a "sequel" to *Running in the Family*, then the difference between the two becomes increasingly apparent.

[12]. Qadri Ismail, for example, argues forcefully that the minorities have been completely ignored in the novel and that in the final analysis, the novel serves the cause of Buddhist Sinhala nationalism. Ranjini Mendis argues that the novel blames the government for violence when in fact it is the Tamil militant group that has caused much of the destruction in the country. The two critics stand at two ends of the spectrum, indicating through their perspectives that stances that appear objective may well be flawed.

[13]. The full text of his acceptance speech appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, 15 November, 2000: R 2.

[14]. Yuson's well-known novel is titled *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* (1988); Carey wrote *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and Okri's novel is titled *The Famished Road* (1991). All three are experimental works, but they are also identifiably "national" in their concerns.

[15]. De Krester is not, strictly speaking, second-generation, but her work reveals characteristics that one often encounters in the work of "new" authors.

[16]. For a valuable discussion of the concept, see pages 31-40 in Dipankar Gupta's *Culture, Space, and the Nation State* (2000). Root metaphors imply a particular kind of recognition that comes from shared cultural space. According to Gupta's argument, diasporic communities do not necessarily have access to that world view. It is possible to argue that second-generation authors, despite their hyphenated identity, are likely to be alienated from that feeling of commonality.

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MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: REVERSING THE CODES OF DOMINANT CULTURE IN MADONNA'S VIDEOCLIP *DON'T TELL ME*[1]

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Like many of Madonna's earlier works, her album *Music* became a world hit when it was released in 2001. After so many years of chameleonic transformations, she again startled the public with a new image; as can be appreciated in the song and clip *Don't Tell Me*, Madonna has begun mixing tecno music with country aesthetics.[2]

In an article on Madonna published just after the release of *Music* it has been argued that she is turning more conservative with age, both in her artistic career and private life; she has even been nicknamed *Material Mom*, instead of *Material Girl* (Rodríguez, 2001: 3). *Don't Tell Me* could be taken as an example of this new 'moderate' image. It is apparently a love song addressed to an implicit male lover, but this is simply a conventional model that can commercially serve to maximize the appeal of the song. Even so, Madonna's songs should not be taken too literally. On the contrary, ambiguity has always been a major element in her prolific hits. With this in mind, a straightforward reading of the chorus lines as a love song is problematized by the rather enigmatic ending: "But please don't tell me to stop". Madonna herself declared that what attracted her about the song was its rebellious aspect in spite of its romantic content (in Sischy, 2001: 34).

Madonna's new image as a rebel cowgirl may acquire more relevance if the cultural and political context of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century is taken into account.[3] The release of this album coincided with the election of

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Madonna's new image as a rebel cowgirl may acquire more relevance if the cultural and political context of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century is taken into account.[3] The release of this album coincided with the election of

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George Bush as the new Republican president of the United States. In the eyes of many, this heralded a return to the traditional values of the country represented by the mythical white and male cowboy hero —an image that the Texan president seemed to embody. In this sense, it could be said that the implicit rebelliousness of *Don't Tell Me* heralds what in 2003 will be a more overt attack against Bush's conservative policy in the polemical —and censored— clip "American Life".[4]

I propose to analyse the musical soundtrack and the actual narrative of the music video *Don't Tell Me* in terms of identity, mainly with reference to gender, but also with reference to the racial implications that the word 'identity' has in the American context. To this purpose I will base my study on cinematic theories of Westerns that highlight the civilizing influence of the mythical white male hero. This convention of the Western as a genre is precisely what is deconstructed in this video with postmodern devices such as fragmentation, paradox and the metafictional 'frame within the frame'.

In many of her former clips, Madonna paid attention to marginal groups, bringing them to the centre. I will try to demonstrate that in this video she has taken the mythical figure of the cowboy as a cultural manifestation of the dominant group and relegated it to the status of 'the other'. Using Dyer's and Mulvey's theories respectively, it can be argued that she not only 'colours' whiteness but actually turns men into fetishes, thus reversing the values traditionally associated with the binary division: dominated and dominating. As a counterpart, she proposes a world of freedom in which boundaries between fantasy and reality no longer exist, i.e. the protagonism of the cowgirl and the relevance of Black and Hispanic cowboy dancers that move in and out of a studio frame.

The freedom advocated in this clip is based on the concept of the fluidity of identities so often dramatized by Madonna in her numerous chameleonic transformations. Basing her analysis on the anti-essentialist view of gender identity, Mónica Calvo states:

> Madonna sets out to expose how women *become* different versions of what patriarchal ideology defines as 'femininity'. She does so in a way that reveals that this is just a process of construction of one's *image*, not an inherent feature of women caused by our biological differences from men (Calvo, 2000: 85; italics in original).

Therefore, in Madonna's music videos, "[w]oman, who has always been the object of male discourse, now becomes the subject of her own text, written in her feminine, ever-expanding, chaotic 'language'" (Calvo, 2000: 85). In this sense, Madonna can be said to embody Stuart Hall's definition of the postmodern subject, especially in her characteristic playfulness with unfixed identities: "the 'postmodern subject' [which] is conceptualized as having 'no fixed, essential or permanent identity' but rather as assuming 'different identities at different times'" (in Hill, 1998: 97).

Thus, as Mark Watts affirms, "changing her image is Madonna's image" (1996: 103). Thomas K. Nakayama and Lisa Peñaloza also relate Madonna with postmodern identity: "Her success at constantly shifting her media images makes her the ultimate postmodern video star" (1993:39). These critics also note that by means of her constant transformations, what Madonna is doing is to foreground the fact that identity is nothing but a social construction. Most of her videos, as is the case of *Don't Tell Me*, portray this idea in relation to both gender and race.

This attitude has the political implication of destabilizing traditionally unquestionable mores that divide individuals into 'normal' and 'other' and bringing to the centre what has for so long been considered to be the 'margins'. It is worth mentioning here Madonna's answer when asked about the meaning of the excess of symbols present in one of her videos: "My idea is to take these iconographic symbols [...] and say, here's another way of looking at it" (in Watts, 1996: 101).

The new image that Madonna offers in the clip *Don't Tell Me* is that of the far west, with images, rhythms and dances related to country music. The clip could be divided into two parts separated by a middle scene. In this sequence the music stops and Madonna sings a cappella kneeling alone on the sand with the sensual movements that characterize her. The structure of the video is interesting because different meanings are developed in every sequence. In the first part, *Don't Tell Me* deploys the aesthetics and cinematic conventions of old Westerns. Afterwards, the fast pace of the narrative is stopped when the music almost disappears. At this point, a low angle camera shot of Madonna shows her in an attitude that clearly recalls those cowboy heroes of earlier films invariably characterized as powerful and in control. This scene, the spectator will soon find out, is no more than a preamble dramatizing the 'limiting' frame of a dominant culture which Madonna then proposes to reverse, deconstruct and turn upside down in order to show its artificiality.[5]

After having briefly presented the structure of the video, the different parts of the clip will now be analysed in more detail. To begin with, the main melody of *Don't Tell Me* includes a guitar sequence that evokes country music. Yet it is true that this traditional folk style is mixed in with electronic tecno and pop music. Secondly, the clip incorporates an important display of Western iconology such as horses, hats, jeans, boots, checked shirts and, above all, the landscape. The desert with hills in the background recalls the so-called 'frontier'. Jean-Pierre Frimbois describes this environment as the wilderness whites wanted to conquer:

> Tous ces intrépides pionniers, tous ces mormons, cow-boys, aventuriers de toutes races, éleveurs de moutons ou chercheurs d'or n'avaient qu'une seule idée en tête: repousser vers l'Ouest les frontières de leur grand pays (in Bouineau, 1989: 5-6).

As K. Folsom explains, the idea of the frontier is a relevant symbol for the construction of the American myth.:

> The presence of the Western frontier was thought to be the most visible symbol of that intangible but very real difference that was early felt to set America off from its European progenitors. The presumed uniqueness of the American spirit, whatever in fact this may have been, was interpreted from the beginning as in large measure a function of the inescapable presence of a fact both moral and geographical with which European civilization was not confronted —the American frontier [...]. For the frontier might be subjugated, as in part it was; it might be assimilated, as in part was also the case; it might be dominated, subdued, incorporated, or exploited; but in no case could it be ignored or left alone (Folsom, 1979: 1).

In other words, this wild frontier was often portrayed as "a virgin world suspended out of time and history, awaiting the inevitable illusion of civilization" (Morgen in Folsom, 1979: 58-9).

Together with the symbolic importance traditionally ascribed to the wilderness goes the idealization of the cowboy figure.[6] Even though one could suppose that the real cowboy must have been a boring character, relentlessly working with cattle, literature and cinema have converted this figure into a myth that "provides a framework for an expression of common ideas of morality and behaviour" that explains "the obvious divergence between the real West and the idealized version, the standardization of plot and characters, and the ridiculous incongruities of cowboys with automobiles and airplanes" (Davis in Folsom, 1979: 20). Chuck Berg analyses the role of the first Westerns at the beginning of the 20th century, which seems to be repeated a hundred years later:

> Undergirding these varied cultural phenomena that reflected the public's abiding fascination with all things Western, was a largely tacit but nonetheless firmly rooted ideology. Promulgated in the decades preceding the American Civil War, the notion of Manifest Destiny suggested that U.S. expansion to the Pacific was not only inevitable but also divinely sanctioned [...]. For Americans entering a new century with a sense of growing responsibility as an emerging world power by dint of its victory in the Spanish-American War [...], the burgeoning discourse on the American West provided an ideal site for elaborating on the ideological implications of Manifest Destiny. In what many historians have now labelled 'The American Century', the American motion picture, especially the western, became a key in the mythologizing process that helped rationalize central aspects of American domestic and foreign policy. Westerns were also important in helping define the very nature of the American character (2000: 212-3).

With this in mind, it could be said that in the clip *Don't Tell Me*, Madonna is deliberately presenting the idyllic past of the West as a proud reminder of white,

male, American roots. However, there are a number of devices throughout the video that highlight the artificiality of those myths, created, to a large extent, by literature and cinema. In this way, Madonna is not "creating a 'real' past but only a simulation of the past based upon pre-existing representations and styles" (Hill, 1998: 101). Thus, Madonna shows that the image people have in mind of the 'authentic' roots of Western America is nothing but a cultural construction. The use of the music video aesthetics foregrounds the artificiality of these films. As E. Ann Kaplan puts it:

> Videos are edited in ways which differ from the classic conventions of the Hollywood film and thus disrupt our expectations of how a film should look. Furthermore, videos 'play off' earlier genres of film, such as the spy film, the western or the horror film, as well as earlier familiar and popular movies (1999: 175).

In this video-clip, the first element of disruption in the song is that of the sharp cuts that constantly interrupt the harmonious melody of the music. This device is also present in the editing of the clip, freezing the image for a few instants, thus fragmenting its continuity in order to provoke a distancing effect in the viewer.[7] When the spectator watches this broken continuity or suture, s/he abandons the illusion that the images on screen are real events, but just an artistic production fabricated out of stills.[8]

The same could be said of another outstanding feature of the clip: the constant use of frames within frames. The first image that is shown is that of a woman walking down a road in the middle of the typical Western desert; she is dressed in the Western fashion with a cowboy hat that hides her face then turned out to be Madonna's when she starts singing. In the next scene, through camera reframing, the spectator is made aware of the fact that Madonna is singing in a studio and that the landscape is not real but is just a screen behind her. From this moment, although the camera again shows the initial position, the spectator now knows that everything is fake.

The same mechanism is used to show the cowboys in the following sequence. They are not set in the actual desert but in a poster that stands on the road like a cigarette advertisement. This detail again underlines the cultural construction of the cowboy myth, an idealization which has nothing to do with real historical facts. Moreover, it could be argued that a further function of this framing effect is that of objectifying the male figures, in this case, the cowboys who, as will be explained afterwards in more detail, become the object of the look of both the cowgirl and the audience. From this perspective and taking into account how women have traditionally been portrayed in Westerns, it appears that Madonna's purpose is to reverse long-standing generic codes.

As in so many other genres in literature and cinema, the female figure in classical Westerns has generally been portrayed as a passive point of reference for the male hero. Like princesses in folk tales, they are "somebody to rescue, somebody to protect. In her presence, the cowboy shows that, in his own way, he is a cultural ideal" (Davis in Folsom, 1979: 22). According to Davis, women's role, especially the white Western woman, is to show the tender side of this otherwise rough and solitary character in order to make of him a perfect figure:

> A cowboy's tenderness is usually revealed through his kindness to horses, and in this sense, the Eastern belle's role is that of a glorified horse [...]. The cowboy ideal is an adorable figure and the heroine is the vehicle of adoration. Female characters enable the author to make observations about cowboys which would be impossible with an all-male cast (1979: 22).

In this clip Madonna is reversing those traditional roles in order to highlight the fact that these rigid codes are not something natural but simply a cultural invention. In the first image, the typical opening scene of most Westerns, Madonna finds herself in the middle of the wilderness. The difference is that in traditional films the most conspicuous character is a cowboy hero and not a woman.

The scene that follows is also very telling. For the first time in the clip Madonna looks straight into the camera provoking an eye-match with the viewer as a female subject, relegating the male cowboy to the position of the object. The importance of this scene, then, derives from the fact that the spectator is given the point of view of a woman, that is, of 'the Other', according to patriarchal dominant culture.[9]

According to Laura Mulvey, the 'look' has a special importance in cinema because it takes the perspective of a particular subject, which is usually male.[10] After analysing the mechanisms and codes in classical cinema, Mulvey concludes that "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (1989: 16) and consequently that "in a world of sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (1989: 19). Since the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, "he projects his look onto that of his like, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (1989: 20). In this sense, Madonna reverses these traditional codes by means of an active female protagonist superimposed on beautiful male objects spectators can enjoy watching.[11]

That is why Madonna's gaze has always been relevant —and more so in this video, where the objects of the imposed gaze are *cowboys*:

> Madonna's self-possessed gaze is directed straight into the camera, as if aroused by and desiring her spectators —us, her voyeurs. This is not the way the script usually reads. Who is the object of whose gaze? Her gaze undermines the spectator's access to illusions of control and mastery developed by the apparatus of classic cinema. Her posture seems to position spectators as masters, while her gaze does the opposite (Morton, 1993: 230).

Underlining this assertion is the fact that while Madonna moves and walks at normal speed, the first cowboy that appears on screen moves more slowly. Thus, the important thing here is not what he is actually doing but for the spectator to enjoy his physique, appearance and movements. Again, with reference to Mulvey's theories, it is relevant to mention how: "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of the action in moments of erotic contemplation" (1989: 19). While Madonna exemplifies this concept, she simultaneously reverses it because it is clearly *she* who is walking, singing and looking —in other words, it is she who takes the active role. For their part, the cowboys are continuously frozen on the screen, as mere elements of spectacle in the narrative.

The fact that the cowboys are not only shown inside frames, but actually as images of a poster reinforces this idea of objectification. The interesting part comes when the cowboys appear, one by one, on the screen following Madonna's steps in secondary position, thus proving that she —the woman— is the one in control. As in her other videos (e.g. *Material Girl, Like a Virgin, Express Yourself*) Madonna is here demonstrating her ability to play a doll-like figure who, by means of her allure, has the power to convert men into puppets. This fact is highlighted by the cowboys' exaggerated movements, at times almost reminiscent of puppets in a fair. Their objectification is also reinforced by their enclosure within the frames of the poster that is contrasted with Madonna's freedom outside of it, whether standing, singing and dancing in front of them or walking along the road. Roseann M. Mandziuk explains this connection between power and sex:

> Throughout her history as a pop icon, Madonna's texts insistently equate pleasure with power, sexuality with control. Her assertion that personal freedom and sexuality are intrinsically linked provides an important clue to the terms of the larger debate over political articulation in contemporary feminist theory.[12] Madonna is a fitting representation of feminism's theoretical struggle to come to terms with the intersection of cultural images and political practices (Mandziuk, 1993: 168).

With all these devices, it can be said that Madonna adds yet another metaphorical dimension to Mulvey's three gazes (actor, camera, spectator): the multiple frames in the clip serve to show up the manipulation that the power of the gaze exerts on the objects of the look.

Another interesting point of analysis in this scene is the fact that the cowboys belong to different races present in America's melting pot (Black, Hispanic and White, the later being no more conspicuous than the others). As Cathy Schwichtenberg affirms, Madonna's music videos have always been addressed to all kind of spectators:

> Madonna has become a mainstream artist who addresses African Americans, Hispanics, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, feminists and others who represent minority or subordinate positions in relation to the dominant cultural and political powers that be (1993: 2).

It could be said that, in the present video, Madonna is objectifying men belonging to different races because patriarchy works over all these cultural groups. Besides, from the perspective of race, we could say that Madonna is bringing to the centre those people who have always been in the margins, equating their position to that occupied by the dominant culture. Chuck Berg states that the classical Western is a white construction in which other races —mainly embodied by the Native Americans— were seen as "an obstacle to overcome —through annihilation, subjugation or 'civilization'— by whites presumably blessed by the divine aura inherent in the nation-building rationale of Manifest Destiny" (2000: 214). Thus, although most Western films point to Anglo-Americans as the centre of U.S. essence and culture, Madonna's clip tries to show that Blacks and Hispanics equally form part of it. That is why they are dressed as cowboys and dance to the rhythm of country music. In this way, the notion of white as the 'invisible norm' that dominates the 'others' is destabilized since, according to Richard Dyer, white is normally presented in an unmarked position (Dyer, 1993: 142).

Finally, there is a last element in the clip that also serves to destabilize the traditional ideology of the Western. It is the road that appears in the middle of the picture every time Madonna is walking alone, disrupting the harmony of the landscape. As mentioned before, in Westerns many long shots are designed to showing the natural wilderness cowboys are confronted with, thus emphasizing how difficult it was for whites to bring civilization there.

Bringing civilization to wilderness is, therefore, presented as a positive concept in old Westerns. Since the Enlightenment, it was believed that "societies would progress forward by means of a general, secular and unilinear process of social development", thus, Europe was viewed as "far advanced, and consequently, as playing a central role in this evolution because of the high standard of civilization already reached in these nations" (Cornut-Gentille, 1995: 7). Later on, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution:

> provided a scientific justification of growth and development that had, once entangled with the capitalist enterprise, become equated with the 'good' of civilization [...]. The conviction that the condition of modern (Western) history was the best that could be, and that Western civilization was fast reaching the pinnacle of human achievement, had evident political connotations, for it confirmed the technological triumph of Culture over nature [...]. It also established a rational for colonialism (1995: 8).

Even though this is the ideology that lies behind old Westerns, there is paradox in the legendary Western scout, whose descendant is the cowboy. He tames the savage wilderness for civilization yet he is represented as escaping from it and seeking the true values of nature:

> The ideal cowboy fights for justice, risks his life to make the dismal little cowtown safe for law-abiding, respectable citizens, but in so doing, he destroys the very environment which made him a heroic figure. This paradox is common with all ideals, and the cowboy legend is certainly the embodiment of a social ideal (Davis in Folsom, 1979: 17).

Nevertheless, it is especially in the 90s that the 'goodness' of white civilization is clearly problematized in movies like Kevin Costner's *Dancing with Wolves*, which was a "pro-Indian story, though still told from a white man's point of view" (Cooks, 1999: 154). In *Don't Tell Me*, the road, the electricity poles and the truck that overtakes Madonna at the beginning of the clip show that civilization has already been brought to this Western desert. At first, these elements could therefore have a positive meaning. They symbolize the development, power and greatness of this nation: a wide network of roads connect every single town of the States, electricity reaches everybody there and those gigantic trucks hurtling across the country prove the wealth and power of American corporations.

However, this image also reflects the dark side of civilization. For instance, the truck very evidently produces a black cloud of smoke that pollutes the landscape. The prominence given to polluting elements brings to mind the ecological problems that are dramatically affecting the planet; contamination and massive road building being the cause of destruction of many ecosystems, not to mention the health problems that people living near electricity pylons may suffer. From this perspective, the truck scene has a further meaning, especially, after President Bush's polemical refusal to sign the Kioto agreement designed to protect ecology worldwide.

From the very first scene, nature and civilization —or culture— are shown to collide, thus forcing onto the spectator a very different reality from that of inherited myths. This clash between nature and culture is also reinforced by the lyrics of the song, which express desires that cannot be realized but that can at least be

formulated in language: "Don't tell me to stop / Tell the rain not to drop / Tell the wind not to blow / Cause you said so". In this way, the song brings together two contrasting elements: language —the basis of civilization and culture— and nature (wind, rain, sun). In her song, she is expressing impossible wishes that escape human control (e.g. "Tell the sun not to shine"). Besides, while she is singing, the images in the video show that her commands are not obeyed; for example, when she says "Tell the wind not to blow", the truck overtakes her, and her hat blows away as a result of the air produced precisely by the movement of the vehicle.

Thus, language as an artifice of culture is shown to be no proof of control or power over nature. This same idea is repeated in the chorus lines: "Tell me love isn't true / It's just something that we do / Tell me everything I am not / But please don't tell me to stop". Love is a feeling, but the conventions of romantic love that Madonna makes reference to in this song are mere cultural constructions feminists have denounced as devices to control women's freedom (Showalter, 1988: 186-7). It is interesting to notice that the first time the chorus is sung, Madonna has started to dance the country line ball, a series of steps that are normally danced mechanically by a group of people, thus suggesting a connection between country line steps and romantic love, both artificially constructed cultural practices that are followed by everybody without being questioned.

The last two lines of the chorus are very telling because they also make reference to Madonna's image: she cannot be categorized because she changes constantly. This is the reason why she does not say "tell me who I am" but the opposite, "everything I am not". E. Ann Kaplan relates the different images that characterize Madonna with the Foucaultian mask, representing no stable identity. In this way yet another subversive meaning is added,

> Madonna as resisting a patriarchal 'feminine' —as offering alternative female identification (the patriarchal mask can be abandoned and the 'real' woman can step forth) and Madonna as problematizing the bourgeois illusion of 'real' individual gendered selves (there is nothing but masks) (Kaplan, 1993: 150).

The chorus stanza ends with Madonna pleading not to be ordered to stop. This is important especially if lack of movement or inactivity is understood as being tantamount to female objectification, in other words, to the 'control' women have suffered throughout history. As Laura Mulvey explains:

> Woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer, not maker of meaning (1989: 15).

Here again, therefore, Madonna turns the situation upside down: *She* is the one who utters the words and projects her fantasies onto the silent images of the *objectified* cowboys.

Taking into account the music, images and lyrics of the first part of the video, the conclusion that can be reached is that Madonna deliberately reverses the traditional codes of dominant patriarchal culture, present in old Westerns. Nonetheless, the relationship between Madonna and the cowboys changes in the second part of the video. She now appears wearing black clothes, following the same country style, but much more in the Madonna-like sexy fashion. It is precisely at that moment that the cowboys join her, wearing the same kind of clothes and dancing outside the patriarchal restrictions of the frame.

Analysing the clip *Vogue*, Mark Watts concludes that Madonna stands as the image the spectator can freely project his/her imagination on:

> In good postmodern fashion, she seems to blur the boundaries and bring fantasy closer to reality. Hence, some theorists have argued that Madonna is a post-feminist icon, and women find in Madonna feelings of emancipation and even empowerment. In a culture of plurality, we can all read into Madonna what we all like ('All you need is your own imagination, so use it, that's what it's for' —*Vogue*) to make our own meanings (1996: 106).

That is precisely what she is doing in this scene: she stands in the centre as the point of reference for the cowboys who, outside the frame or without the constrictions of a dominant culture, can liberate their own feelings and imagination. In this sense, it could be said that Madonna is not only offering herself as an example for women but also inviting men to free themselves from the rigid codes of behaviour established by patriarchal conventions by inviting them to jump out of the limiting frame and to follow her steps in her new dance.

After that scene Madonna appears riding a fake horse, which could again be taken as a symbol of the artificial control of patriarchy over nature. This image of Madonna riding the bucking bronco totally in control and following the rhythm of the music is contrasted with that of the cowboy, whose legs do not seem to be strong enough to keep his balance on the horse. Again she walks along the road looking down and then up, with an ironic gaze at the camera. Then, there is an eye match and the spectator sees the elegant cowboy in a long shot being unsaddled by the horse and falling down to the ground. Afterwards, the camera shows the character standing up and looking at the horse, which is offscreen, as if something else was going to happen after the image fades out.

This final scene reinforces the idea that patriarchy is an artifice of culture presented throughout the clip. Firstly, because this beautiful and elegant cowboy is again

objectified by Madonna's active look; patriarchal codes are reversed and questioned as 'unnatural'. Secondly, a further implication of this scene is that patriarchy has no sense anymore because, embodied by the cowboy, it literally falls flat when that man loses control and is thrown by the horse he was trying to tame. In Westerns, cowboys are the ones in power who manage to dominate wild nature, however, in this video, Madonna foregrounds the fictionality of those films. When the cowboy is riding the horse, he is within the frames of a poster because he embodies the idealized mythical figure in the stills of films. However, when this man falls off, these frames disappear. Thus, in real life, he is just presented as a human being, with his own limitations and no longer in control, once his mechanisms for maintaining his dominant position in society have been destabilized.[13]

On the other hand, this ending also makes reference to the second part of the video where the cowboys join in Madonna's freedom. The fact that all of them dance together with the female singer may mean that there is a possibility of reconciliation between the sexes. This possibility of reconciliation comes when the clip does not end with the cowboy's fall but goes on to show him getting up after having been unsaddled and looking at the horse again. This cowboy, then, has to accept his loss of control over the horse, yet he is not totally defeated; he, a white male who once belonged to the dominant culture, and now has another opportunity to establish a new kind of relationships with nature or 'the other', beyond the boundaries of patriarchy.

To conclude, it can be said that although Madonna has come back with a different image, her criticism of the limits that the dominant culture imposes on groups belonging to the 'Other' is still patent in her artistic production. In *Don't Tell Me* the traditional cinematic codes of the Western are reversed and questioned, while a possibility of reconciliation between all the groups that form part of American society is offered.

Notes

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[2]. Even though popular songs and video-clips are not considered to be the exclusive result of the star's own work but that of a team, in the analysis of Madonna's work, critics seem to agree that she is proportionally more in control of her performances than other artists: "The specific kind of power Madonna exudes is control: control of her performance and how the rehearsal is conducted and control over those who work for her" (Pribram, 1993: 198). Madonna herself confirmed this in an interview with the ABC reporter Forrest Sawyer in the program "Nightline": "I do everything in my own volition. I'm in charge" (in Mandziuk, 1993: 171). Referring to that interview, Caryn James reaches the same conclusion: "For her video images and lyrics, Madonna proves that she's in control" (1990: 38). In *Don't Tell Me* Madonna collaborated in the music, lyrics and making of the music video. For this reason I will refer to her as the person responsible for some points of my analysis, although I am aware of the team-work that lies behind this kind of artistic product. Whether or not she has full control over her production, it is the ideological meanings of the outcome and the coherence of Madonna's artistic career that is the object of my analysis.

[3]. Madonna's image of female sexual independence has often been associated with Marlene Dietrich, who has been evoked more than once in Madonna's clips, e.g. *Express Yourself*. As Mónica Calvo comments: "Dietrich was venerated by women for her sexual independence, power and androgynous 'masculine' ways. Funnily enough, Madonna is idolized today by her fans for precisely the same 'qualities'" (2000: 86). Dietrich's intertextual evocation could also be present in this music video, as she also played a role in Westerns such as *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939) and *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952).

[4]. The successful and controversial clip *American Life*, which was released in May 2003, was replaced by a simplified censored version a few weeks later due to its explicit and critical references to the Second Irak War. The wide display of military iconology, the images of sad Arab children and the final scene of an actor characterized as George Bush were replaced by Madonna singing against a background of constantly changing flags from countries all around the world.

[5]. Cathy Switchtenberg explains that: "Madonna bares the devices of femininity, thereby by asserting that femininity is a device. Madonna takes simulation to its limits in a deconstructive manoeuvre that plays femininity off against itself —a metafemininity that reduces gender to the overplay of style" (in Calvo, 2000: 85).

[6]. As Davis explains: "The cowboys in books and movies are far too busy making love and chasing bandits to work at such a dreary task as driving cattle [...]. The fact that the cowboy hero has more important things to do is only in keeping with his tradition and audience. His is only a natural reaction against a civilization which demands increasingly monotonous work, against the approaching adulthood when playtime ends" (in Folsom, 1979: 20).

[7]. This distancing effect is based on Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, whose aim is to prevent the spectator from getting involved in the narrative, a 'willing suspension of disbelief' that forces the observer to adopt a critical attitude (Chiarini, 1969: 116).

[8]. The concept of suture is crucial in the process of identity construction and its relationship with cinema because, as Rey Chow declares: "as expressed through suture —literally a 'sewing up' of gaps— cinematic identification is an eminently ideological process" (1998: 170). Doing away with that classical invisible suture, Madonna's clip aims to render visible the invisible ideological mechanisms of the Western.

[9]. As Laclau explains, "Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles —man/woman, etc. What is peculiar of the second term is thus reduced to the function of an accident as opposed to the essentiality of the first" (in Hall, 1997: 5).

[10]. Even though much writing has derived from Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (new theories have been developed by Mary Anne Doane,

Elizabeth Cowie, Gaylyn Studlar and Barbara Creed among others; see Patricia White, 1998: 119-130), I find Mulvey's theory useful not so much in terms of the *audience's identification* but in terms of the *representations* of the male and female characters in classical Westerns, which I think Madonna tries to undermine.

[11]. Richard Dyer and Steve Neale argue that it is possible to find male objectification in cinema, however: "the male is objectified, but only in scenes of action, such as boxing. Mainstream cinema cannot afford to acknowledge the possibility that the male spectator might take the male protagonist as an object of his erotic desire" (in Creed, 1998: 85).

[12]. As Madonna has stated, "the only way to control people is to control their sex lives. As for me, I don't like the idea of being controlled" (in Schwitenberg, 1993: 167).

[13]. Pam Cook notices that in the 1990s, "there was a concerted effort to counter criticism of the western's ideological shortcomings with a series of politically correct films" (2000:154). Clint Eastwood's film of 1992 *Unforgiven* nostalgically recalls the ideals of the Western though more realistically portrayed. In this sense, this movie can be compared to the last scene of Madonna's clip; however, her criticism in the manipulation of the Western myth goes even further.

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DYLAN THOMAS'S ANIMAL SYMBOLOGY IN CELTIC TRADITION: THE INNER VOICE OF A POET

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Dylan Thomas was born with the gift of poetry: in his poems, meaning and form become the most perfect symbiotic achievement. Yet, the exposure of his inner soul as related to the world, far from owing its success exclusively to inspiration, has also evolved as a result of a carefully applied technique, which focuses on the combination of sounds within the whole, the byzantine selection of words and the elaborate quality of the metaphors. The subject matter, basically reduced to the author's preoccupation for his own survival in Cosmos, becomes the essential matter within Thomas's production. This theme is carefully ostracized from the poem through its focus on symbolic figures, mostly balanced in a system of opposites. The poetic struggle between naturally confronting animal symbols descends directly from Welsh Celtic cultural tradition, as these pages will subsequently evince. Thomas thus intimates that personal allegiance to cultural values becomes the only possibility for redemption in the chaos portrayed in his modernist universe.

Thomas's perception of the symbol is totally modern in its concern with poetic *mimesis*. Paul De Man recalls that "the opposition between 'good' and modern poetry [...] and not so good and not so modern poetry [...] is made in terms of contrast between poetry of representation and a poetry that would no longer be mimetic" (de Man, 1971: 170). Yet, if poetry is not *mimesis* anymore, what do symbols stand for? Paul Ricoeur, drawing most conveniently from Cassirer, alludes to symbols as "quasi-texts" or "symbolic mediation" and distinguishes between "an

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implicit or immanent symbolism", which provides an initial readability "in opposition to an explicit or autonomous one" (Ricoeur, 1984: 57) that is subject to interpretation. According to this second view, the symbol aims at but never successfully represents; its function becomes mere mediation. Consistently with his views, de Man asserts that "truly modern poetry is a poetry that has become aware of the incessant conflict that opposes a self, still engaged in the daylight world of reality, of representation, and of life" (de Man, 1971: 171) and later he completes this idea by concluding that "loss of representational reality (*Entrealisierung*) and loss of self (*Entpersönlichung*) go hand in hand" (de Man, 1971: 172). In order to fight the questioning of self, a revision of the function of symbols must be attempted. Edinger, who similarly defines the symbol as "a mystery communicating living, subjective meaning" (Edinger, 1992: 109), believes that the ego becomes a victim of symbols that are experienced but not perceived. Because symbols are "spontaneous products of the archetypal psyche" (Edinger, 1992: 110), Jungian psychology proposes to bring symbols to the state of consciousness in order to be able to recognize the archetype (Edinger, 1992: 113). By defending the inability of words (that he calls "symbols of speech") to grasp total meaning, Jung brings us back to the concept of *mimesis*. Significantly, he hints at the correlation between symbol and myth when he points out that: "words came in the end to have a substantiality with which the ancients could invest their Logos only by attributing to it a mystical value" (Jung, 1993: 29).

The rejection of *mimesis* is shared within a tradition of visionary poets who share a vision of Cosmos similar to that of Thomas, who elaborate on archetypal images, and who use visual representation to access a humanized universe. Thus, the image of fountain water in the opening lines of Thomas's "Rain Cuts the Place we Tread" quickly brings to the reader's mind Blake's visions. As a matter of fact, Blake's influence descends on Thomas via Yeats who, not only discusses him in such pieces as "Symbolism in Painting", for example, but also acknowledges Blake's open authority over a long phase in his production. Blake's poetry, however, presents a number of features that mark a distance from Thomas's notion of reality: Blake is much more abstract in his consideration of truth and he is also more conventional in his avoidance of distortion; in addition, Blake is conscious of the difference between experience and its symbolic interpretation, while the modernist poet is not. Notwithstanding these limitations, Thomas shows a similar concern for his relationship to reality: like Blake, he believes that art is not mimetic but aims at the truth. That truth, Blake proposes, can only be reached by "participating in the symbol-making process and seeing through symbols to the reality they only partly express" (Damrosch, 1980: 76). Thus he accesses the concept of archetype: "He ransacks various mythologies for symbols while claiming that they all reflect a single unity" (Damrosch, 1980: 72), which becomes his ultimate link to Thomas.

Yeats uses the same concept of archetype when he borrows images and themes from Celtic myth and he goes further in the use of animal symbols such as heron, gull, eagle and swan. At a purely theoretical level, his connection to Thomas must be understood through "his early discovery of the French Symbolists through Arthur Symons [who] had taught him to admire them, but he was aware of their limitations" (Henn, 1966: 128). As a poet and a critic, Yeats succeeds in blending emotional, intellectual and archetypal symbols and later actualizing them within Celtic myth as a means of recreating well-known images that he relates to significant aspects of his life. In this context, symbols respond to his need to explain the relationship between the system that he creates and the meaning he seeks for. There are two consequences: on the one hand, Yeats's succeeds in creating a personal myth resulting from his own living experience; on the other, "the animal and bird symbolism is steadily reduced as Yeats grows older. Irish myth is foreshortened, discarded unless it can be made relevant to the present" (Henn, 1966: 146).

The picture would not be complete if we overlooked Ted Hughes, the modernist poet best known for his use of animal symbols. In an attempt to reflect upon his animal symbols, entitled *Poetry Is*, he starts from the following statement: "In a way, I suppose I think of poems as a sort of animal" (Hughes, 1970: 9). The poet later analyzes his relation to the animal world from the age of three, when he became obsessed with modeling in plasticine and drawing, all through his childhood in Yorkshire until "finally, [...], at about fifteen, my life grew more complicated and my attitude to animals changed. I accused myself of disturbing their lives" (Hughes, 1970: 11). At about the same time, he began to write poetry. Clearly, Hughes's view of his craft became inextricably bound up with the idea of hunting: the poem is an animal itself. Endowed with life, the poem energy is drawn from its harmonious structure: "It is better to call it an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms. The spirit is the life which inhabits them when they all work together" (Hughes, 1970: 11).

Born and bred in earlier Twentieth century Wales, Thomas found himself within the poetic tradition directly evolved from Welsh rhythmical patterns, while at the same time, he made a positive effort to detach himself from the Welsh small town mentality,

> Thomas's Welshness is an important part of his make-up. He never spoke or understood the Welsh language, and he very early taught himself to speak English not with the slight Welsh sing-song but with what he himself described mockingly as a 'cut-glass accent'. He disliked Welsh nationalism, and, indeed, all types of nationalism, but Wales remained to him home (Fraser, 1977: 6).

It is well known that Dylan Thomas's father, a product of a newly implemented public education system, grew up to become a strict literature teacher who managed to interest his only son in poetry through his gift for declamation, "He loved to read aloud in clear, rich tones, barely flecked with an accent. It was the style on which his son came to base his own sonorous delivery, that way of reading poems and telling funny stories that some found unforgettable, others fraudulent" (Ferris, 1989: 19). As a consequence, Dylan Thomas's early poetry, which was written before his sixteenth birthday, evinces a strong taste for traditional rhythms. This combination of popular culture and strong poetic feeling defines Dylan Thomas as a *rara avis* within the patterns of modernism (Spears, 1970: 42). Daiches comments on the estrangement of Thomas who, "[...] has been held up by some as the antithesis of Eliot and his school, renouncing the cerebral orderliness of the 1920s and the 1930s in favor of a new romanticism, an engaging irresponsibility" (1966: 16).

A preliminary reading of Thomas's pieces usually leaves in his audience a sense of old-fashioned confusion, a somewhat altered state of mind, perhaps, as a consequence of some form of modernist insomnia. Each piece requires a further attempt, however, which opens the possibility of decoding a solid structure, generally articulated on a system of contraries. Eros and Thanathos are portrayed by Thomas as pushing from opposite extremes and thus, generating a feeling of anxiety that very often suggests some form of authorial madness. Agony and discomfort appear to inspire a poetry suspiciously generated in the vapors of alcohol, as a consequence of a tremendously challenging personality from the point of view of his creativity, although somewhat difficult to handle in a more personal perspective: "He toddled about the bars and bookshops, asked women to take him to their beds, talked to other poets, and behaved outrageously at literary parties" (Fitzgibbon, 1965: 308). Such feelings would be experienced by the poet throughout his entire life, which becomes easily perceptible in the content of his poems. In those, the rejection of the center is curiously replaced by an emphasis on the destructive breach of two opposing forces that, pulling from separate ends, respond for the development of meaning within each piece.

The subject matter of his poems is an issue that has long concerned critics even from the period when the poet was still alive and active. Perhaps, the most interesting view that we have encountered is that of Alphonsus M. Reddington, who defines Thomas as "a poet who thought before he wrote and who had something significant to say" (Reddington, 1968: 7). This quality is what causes the critic to view Thomas's poetic evolution as a journey "which Thomas proposed to be taking by focusing upon his internal conflicts" (Reddington, 1968: 5); this becomes an ever present poetic subject throughout his production. If we must accept the idea of a journey, however, Thomas's failed search for its center

stereotypes him as an anti-hero. However, as happens in the mythic journey, it is not the end that embodies the valuable hidden truth, but the poetic process itself and that process, undeniably, stands around the figure of the poet's ego.

Coincidentally, Annis Pratt shows an analogous view to that of Reddington in her analysis of Thomas's images, identifying myth as a necessary component in his metaphors and locating their value in symbolism.

> From the universal and embarrassing agonies of puberty he forges presentations of ritual initiation into manhood that achieve the style and stature of myth. By 'myth' I mean, in this context, both the social, pseudo historical folklore handed down through tradition and the inward, integrative symbolism which the individual shapes into art (Pratt, 1970: 52).

Although this study is not directly concerned with Dylan Thomas's images, Trolley has an observation that is relevant to my argument: "He [Thomas] seems to have 'built up' his poems out of phrases. In so doing, he appears not merely to have been working towards 'meaning' but also towards a maximizing of intensity" (Tolley, 1975: 274). It would seem, then, that the poet initially built associative images as a step by step process. This *modus operandi*, which seems to be highly productive for a poet who certainly aims at communicating a valuable thought, is much less felicitous for his readership when it comes to dealing with the intricate complexity of form, as Daiches, again, points:

> [...] But the fact remains that the poem is congested with its metaphors, and the reader is left with a feeling of oppression. A fair number of Thomas's earlier poems are obscure for this reason. It is not the obscurity of free association or references to private reading, but an obscurity which results from an attempt to pack too much in a short space, to make every comma tell, as it were (1966: 21).

Fortunately enough, Thomas uses symbols as natural decoders of the poetic extravagance he aims to build around a central core of meaning, where he hides one single idea: that of his essential conflict, "Thomas uses words or images at a level more fundamental than that at which the conventional notion of 'meaning' applies. He thus gets literary respectability as a 'symbolist' [...] a sort of Welsh Mallarmé cum Rimbaud" (Tolley, 1975: 273).

The combination of dual principle and symbolism helps the reader greatly, since, as Tolley hilariously remarks in comparing Thomas to Empson: "[...] It is necessary to grasp the single and often highly specialized aspect of a metaphor that is literal and to ignore the rest: then, the poem becomes comprehensible" (Tolley, 1975: 275). As a matter of fact, most of Thomas's poems become easily transfigurable once we learn to identify the underlying Manichaean principle:[1]

> The most basic of these antitheses is that of light and darkness, which Thomas himself mentioned. Flowing from these two is a host of others. The following are the most representative: life (resurrection) and death; eternity (immortality) and time (mortality); creation and destruction; certitude and doubt; soul and body; innocence and sin; love and sex; union and isolation; trust and fear; joy and grief; peace and suffering. For clarity and convenience, the sources of conflict will be reduced to three major heads, relating to philosophical, moral and theological issues respectively (Reddington, 1968: 6).

Coincidentally, there are a number of critics who support the view that this dualism, all essential in Thomas's conception of reality, is a direct consequence of the poet's ascestry. Thus, John Ackerman states that, "the art of composition in Welsh poetry owes much to [an] apprehension of the duality of existence. The poem itself tends to be a pattern of the experience, but given without a narrative design" (1966: 31). Pratt holds a similar view on the same subject: "The 1930-32 Notebook leaves little doubt that at one time he shared the Welsh chapel tendency to split the world into a Manichaean division of heaven and hell" (Pratt, 1970: 85).

As to the opinion that the Welsh tradition promotes a view based on the dramatic division between two opposing poles, we must strongly disagree. On the contrary, Celtic druidism proposed a philosophical model consisting of the perfect identification between God and Cosmos, otherwise known as pantheism.[2] This essential fusion of the natural and metaphysical world is nevertheless compatible with the hypothesis of a primitive chaos emerging from the combat between the forces of light and those of darkness, which gave the present world its origin. Traces of such a battle are to be found in all Celtic mythologies; thus in Ireland, the *Leabhar Ghabhala* portrays the fight between the Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Formorians:[3] "Fearful indeed was the thunder which rolled over the battlefield, the shouts of the warriors, the breaking of the shields, the flashing and clashing of the swords" (Rolleston, 1994: 117). Similarly, in Wales, *The Book of Taliesin* presents a battle of trees where one of the sides is led by Arawn, king of Annwn, the Welsh Otherworld, and the other by Gwydyon (Markale, 1992: 358).[4]

Those episodes were later circumscribed into the characteristic Celtic harmony that enforced such concepts as transmigration of souls, continuity between the living world and the Otherworld and unity with the Supreme Being through natural contemplation. This being so, Ackerman's opinion that "another important feature of old Welsh poetry is an awareness of the dual nature of reality, of unity in disunity, of the simultaneity of life and death, of time as an eternal moment rather than as something with a separate past and future" (1966: 30) can only be applied to Thomas under the Celtic principle that opposing extremes must be understood as an integral part of the supreme whole (Markale, 1989: 184).

Directly linked to the underlying structure is the tradition of the symbol. The presence of symbols in Thomas's poems is justified by a number of coincidental factors, namely symbolist poetics, the poet's aim to express a destructive inner struggle and, last but not least, the incidence of Welsh cultural traditions, "since he knew no Welsh, this influence came through the two channels already mentioned: contact with Welsh-speaking relatives and friends, and through translations of Welsh poetry and prose" (Ackerman, 1966: 27).

The ultimate relevance of Celtic patterns in Thomas's verse is hinted at by such factors as lexical items, rhythmical structure and the nature of the symbol itself. Color, for instance, which Thomas uses profusely,[5] becomes one of the most characteristic examples of Celtic influence, since it is "[...] another feature which is characteristic of Celtic texts and distinguishes it from other ancient and Mediaeval literatures" (Jackson, 1967: 183). In his use of animal symbology in two poems, Thomas surprisingly endows certain objects with color connotations that are contradictory (positive and negative). In "Poem in October", there is an implicit allusion to color in the mystic connotations that Thomas attaches to herons: "And the mussel pooled and the heron/priested shore" (3-4). Similarly, in "In Contry Sleep", more concerned with country memories, Thomas ciphers his well known system of opposites by using a color code: "Fear or believe that the wolf in a sheepwhite hood" (3).

Another factor, rhythmic design, was also borrowed by Thomas from popular sources. Its influence lies mainly in the sound structure. This Welsh metrical pattern, called *cynghanedd*, confers such musicality on the pieces as to justify the ancient bardic notion that a poem is composed to be listened to,

> The word *cynghanedd* means harmony, and in poetry is a means to giving pattern to a line by the echoing of sound, consonantal and vowel. There are three main divisions of *cynghanedd*: *cynghanedd gytsain* consists of multiple alliteration; *cynghanedd sain* has alliteration and rhyme within the line; and *cynghanedd lusg* has internal rhyme only (Ackerman, 1966: 32).

Certainly, Thomas portrays a great number of rhythmical effects carried through by means of figures of speech or simply by the more casual effect of his own poetic intuition, underpinned by the traditional structure of *cynghanedd*. Instances of *cynghanedd* are easily found in Thomas's production, as in "I make this is a warring absence": "And opium head, crow stalk, puffed, cut, and blown" (10).[6]

Yet, the most important feature that Thomas borrows from his Celtic forefathers, both in terms of its frequency and its value as focus and decoder, is the symbol, and more specifically, the animal symbol. The range of animal images that Dylan Thomas introduces in his lines is extensive as it includes general terms such as

"beast", "animal", "insect" or "bird" and also more specific nouns like "crocodile", "whale", "spider" or "sparrow".[7] Although the lexical list is very comprehensive, for the practical purposes of this essay, we intend to focus on an analysis of animal symbols that are specific to Celtic imagery and that, in addition, are used by Thomas as symbols instead of mere images.[8]

The figures are eloquent enough. Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems* includes more than eighty-five references to the generic "bird". The high occurrence of this item can hardly be chance, but responds to conscious poetic expression. Certainly, a closer analysis identifies this "bird" clearly as a symbol: in the first place, it concentrates abstract meaning; secondly, it functions as a significant reference within the line and, most importantly, it correlates a set of values that remain permanent throughout Thomas's production.

In his *Dictionary of Symbols*, Jack Tresidder states that birds are the "embodiment of both the human and cosmic spirit —a symbolism suggested by their lightness and rapidity, the soaring freedom of their flight and their mediation between earth and sky" (1998: 25). In fact, there are a number of poems in Thomas's production in which the bird symbol involves certain transcendence. One such instance is "Sometimes the Sky's Too bright", where the poet establishes a correspondence between birds and heaven itself: "Sometimes the sky's too bright / or has too many clouds or birds, / and far away's too sharp a sun" (1-3). Similarly, in one of his birthday poems, "Poem in October", birds anticipate the poet's desire for eternity: "My birthday began with the water- / birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name / above the farms and the white horses" (11-13). This idea of freedom is further expressed in "Ears in the Turrets Hear" where the poet feels imprisoned in his human body and uses the bird symbol in order to express the idea of a transition:

> Beyond this island bound
> By a thin sea of flesh
> And a bone coast,
> The land lies out of sound
> And the hills out of mind.
> No birds of flying fish
> Disturbs this island's rest (10-16).

Together with the association of birds with heavenly matters[9] and the positive connotations carried by the symbol, like its assimilation to the realm of light,[10] birds, in Thomas's poetry emphasize a more notorious cultural meaning that acquires significance when understood against the poet's Welsh background. In the Celtic world, birds, of all symbols, worked out different layers of meaning as a consequence of the introduction of Christianity with its a complementary set of values. One of those is particularly characteristic of Thomas's poetry:

> Birds are especially close to the Druids and poets, who sometimes decorated themselves with feathers. [...]. The ability to understand birds represents the highest art that a poet can achieve. Merlin (Myrddin) achieved this ability after he lost his mind and withdrew into the forest (Heinz, 1998: 85).

Thus, in "Poet: 1935", the poet talks about himself as "O lonely among many, the god's man" (47) because he has the gift of vision: "Out of a bird's wing writing on a cloud / you capture more than man or woman guesses" (53-54). According to the same underlying principle, in "Especially when the October Wind",[11] the poet views himself as an interpreter of supernatural signs and, very interestingly, transforms himself into several animal symbols that allow him to observe the world from the perspective of first a crab, and later, a spider. In this context, the birds appear in a parallel structure in line five: "By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds" and later, in line thirty-two: "By the sea's side hear the dark-vowelled birds". Considered jointly, the sequence of lines involves the idea that the poet embodies the supernatural qualities of a bard who is capable of interpreting natural signs (as a pantheistic manifestation of God himself) as encoded in the secret language of birds and trees.

Another example is "Over Sir John's Hill", a very rich poem which opens with the image of the poet expressing his feelings of closeness to the divinity from his perspective up on a hill: "Over Sir John's hill / the hawk on fire hangs still". The small birds of the bay that appear in line four will be the conductors of the poet's vision, which goes beyond reality: "Death clear as a buoy's bell" and grieves at the contemplation of the souls incarnated in the birds: "We grieve as the blithe birds, never again, leave, shingle and elm". Again, at the end of the poem, the poet reveals himself as a bard who listens to the signs of nature:

> [...] and I who hear the tune of the slow,
> wear-willow river, grave,
> before the lunge of the night, the notes on this time-shaken
> stone for the sake of the souls of the slain birds sailing (59-62).

In general terms, there are a number of indicators to consider when analyzing the bird symbols appearing in Dylan Thomas's production. In the first place, their relevance in Thomas's discourse is related to the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. This essential idea is contained in Celtic texts such as *Imramm Curaig Mael Dúin*: "in eoin adcidsi dano isna crandaib, ol se, anmanda mo claindisi 7 mo chenéoil etir mna 7 firu at é sút ic irrnaidhi laí bratha" (Oskamp, 1970: 138).[12] Birds represent in Dylan Thomas's poetry the souls of the dead. Thus, in "Out of the Pit", full of Biblical allusions, Thomas's birds announce their allegiance to God as the companions of the saint who, "Still in his hut, [...] broods among his birds"

(102). They explicitly appear after death occurs: "And took to feeding birds with broken crumbs / of old divinities split bits of names" (85). In similar circumstances, "it is the sinner's dust-tongued bell" that progresses from the initial idea of a sin committed against the child and, retrospectively, against sex. In this context, the bird stands as an epitome of the immaculate soul: "And from the pacing weather-cock / The voice of bird on coral prays" (19). However, perhaps the poem in which those values become most evident is "After the Funeral", where the poet proclaims himself Ann's bard and he chants: "Bless her bent spirit with four, crossing birds" (26).

As stated above, the productivity of birds as poetic symbols lies in their double embodiment of both flesh and spirit. This paradox is carefully unbalanced by Thomas on the introduction of a significant color code that contrasts birds of life and birds of death. Thus, "I make this in a warring absence" opens with a mythical counterbalance represented in two animal symbols: the crow "And opium head, crow stalk, puffed, cut, and blown" (10) and the pigeon "And a silk pigeon's guilt in her proud absence" (17). Those birds adjust to the color code that comes directly from the mythic idea of a battle between light and darkness. In this poem, the birds act as agents that actualize the process of transcendence: "Destruction, picked by birds, brays through the jaw bone" (36) and following it, the intervention of two Celtic symbols introduce the idea of rebirth: "The cauldron's root through this once-rindless hand / Fumed like a tree, and tossed a burning bird" (55-56).

The tree is a well-known universal symbol of origin and of center. In Ireland, sacred trees were called *bile* and they are referred to in the *Dinnsenchas* as the source of sacred wisdom. The sacred space within the forest was known as *nemeton* (Green, 1995: 56). The *nemeton* was a place of worship and a symbol of the center "L'atteinte du Paradis implique, pour le commun des mortels, le passage par la mort et ses pérégrinations agoissantes et périlleuses" (Burgos, 1972: 85). The cauldron, on the other hand, is a specifically Celtic object and its relevance is directly related to the rite of passage, "El caldero es para los celtas un objeto relacionado con el conocimiento, la vida y la muerte y tenía un gran valor religioso y simbólico" (García Casado, 1995: 68). Celtic texts recorded the significance of three cauldrons: the cauldron of abundance, belonging to Daghda; the cauldron of resurrection, belonging to Bran, and the sacrificial cauldron.

Thomas goes further into the contrasting idea of life and death as represented in bird symbology in "A Winter's Tale", a poem portraying a number of animal symbols. Here, the continuity of the bird symbol helps the reader understand the true nature of the process taking place. The poem's starting point occurs in a natural setting and later moves towards a truly legendary scene: "Once when the

world turned old" (11), where the hero appears: "As the food and flames of the snow, a man unrolled / the scrolls of fire that burned in his heart and head" (13-14). This man, in strict application of the mythic scheme described by Propp,[13] develops a need, "His naked need struck him howling and bowed" (39), and the birds are linked to the image of death. "Hunger of birds in the fields of the bread of water [...] when cold as snow he should run the wended vales" (42-45). The moment of death is represented in the mythic union between the hero and the mother goddess: "Alone and naked in the engulfing bride" (53) and the nightingale intervenes using his natural abilities: "And spells on the winds of the dead his winter's tale" (59). After this turning point, the birth of a she-bird marks the successful transformation of the soul: "A she-bird rose and rayed like a burning bride" (69) and the hero reappears made one with nature: "And the sky of birds in the plumed voice charmed / him up and he ran like a wind after the kindling flight" (88-89). The sacred nature of the process is secured again through the image of birds, "When black birds died like priests in the cloaked hedge row" (62) and the resurrection is thus guaranteed: "And the bird descended" (76). In other words, all through the poem, bird symbols assist the reader to perceive the mythic nature of the tale:

> Bird, he was brought low,
> Burning in the bride bed of love, in the whirl-
> Pool at the wanting centre, in the folds
> Of paradise, in the spun bud of the world.
> And she rose with him flowering in her melting snow (126-130).

This representation of a rite of passage is symbolized in the natural qualities of birds as heralds of annual cyclic change. This is the reason why Thomas represents them associated with the classical topos of *carpe diem* in "Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's month", as evinced in the title itself. This poem, constituting a lament on the passing of time, beautifully exploits the quintessence of the symbol as associated with the living cycle: "Lie this fifth month unskated, and the birds have flown" (9).[14]

In Thomas's production, the generic "bird" that we have been analyzing so far, is later broken into a variety of species. Remarkable for their place in Celtic culture are the owl, the eagle, the crane, the crow, the swan, the cock, the goose, and the dove, all of them used by Thomas in his poems.[15]

The most common of these birds in Dylan Thomas's poetry is the raven. Contrary to the common symbolic reference in today's world, in Celtic tradition the appearance of the raven was not a negative omen, but a positive sign related to the prophetic gifts of the bird (Green, 1995: 88). Associated with this bird were the Irish goddesses Macha, Bodh and Moir-Rígan who, acting more like Viking

walkiria than mother goddesses, visit the warriors to warn them of their impending death in battle, as seen in the epic *Táin Bó Cualgney*: "Now it was the Morrígan settled in bird shape on a standing stone in Temair Chuailnge, and said to the Brown Bull: Dark one are you restless / do you guess they gather / to certain slaughter / the wise raven / groans aloud" (Kinsella, 1988: 98-103). In Welsh myth, the raven becomes the totemic animal of Branwen's family, also associated with a magic cauldron of rebirth and a war between Wales and Ireland which culminates with her brother's, Bendigeit Bran's, death (Rolleston, 1994: 371).

Dylan Thomas uses this tradition in order to build a similar set of values on the symbolic referent. Thus, in "The Ploughman's Gone", the poet expresses his wishes for the man: "You shall go as the others have gone, / lay your head on a hard bed of stone / and have the raven for companion" (16-18). "The Woman Speaks" opens with an appeal for an afterlife: "No food suffices but the food of death" (2) where the sibyl appeals to the raven as a transformer: "The heart lies ready for the raven's mouth" (8), who will eventually succeed in carrying death to the hero, "And ravens fed confection to their young" (59). Particularly interesting is the presence of this symbol in one of Thomas's birthday poems, "Especially when the October Wind". Here, the raven appears at the beginning of the piece, when the poet starts a regression towards his past: "By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds / Hearing the raven cough in winter sticks" (5-6), and also at the end, once he is back to his present reality and looks forward to the future: "Some let me tell you of the raven's sins" (24). Finally, in "All and all the dry world's lever", the raven fulfills its functions of anticipator of the Otherworld: "Know now the flesh's lock and vice, / and the cage for the scythe-eyed raven" (20-21).[16]

Less important than the raven is the owl. Far from esteem that the owl enjoys in present times as a symbol of wisdom, in ancient European legends, this birds seems to have been invested with a sinister symbolism as a guardian of the night. In Welsh myth, transformation into an owl is described as a form of punishment inflicted on Blodeuwedd. Curiously enough, Blodeuwedd's husband, Llew Llaw Gyffes,[17] was injured by her and later transformed into an eagle which,

> in Welsh tradition [...] is considered one of the three oldest animals and people have wanted to transform into this bird in order to, for example, survive in the Otherworld. The eagle also stands for wisdom and visionary ability, which gives it royal dignity (Heinz, 1998: 103).

Owls and eagles symbolize different qualities in Dylan Thomas's poetry. The eagle appears rarely in his texts and its relevance is directly related to a scene of death appearing in early Celtic Christian texts,[18] where the *curagh* sailing to the Otherworld becomes engulfed by essential whiteness, which gives it access to a superior dimension. This is what happens in "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait",

where the eagle stands for the royal symbol of god, once the boat has reached the world's limits: "The polar eagle with its tread of snow" (80). The eagle is much more popular in Thomas's early poems that in his main production; this is perhaps due to the fact that the further he progresses in his art, the more he departs from conventionalism. Thus, "In Admit the Sun", the eagle borrows classical values allusive to the sun: "Admit the sun into your high nest / Where the eagle is a strong bird" (1-2), whereas in "I have come to Catch your Voice" and "My River" the symbol acquires a truly Celtic meaning which refers to survival in the Otherworld as associated with love poetry: "Oh, eagle-mouthed, / I have come to pluck you, / and take away your exotic plumage" (10-12).[19]

The owl, on the contrary, is present in Thomas's best known pieces, usually belonging to a later stage in his production, and containing a great display of animal symbols. We have selected three examples, namely "Poem in October", "A Winter's Tale" and "Lament". In all these pieces the appearance of the owl is directly associated with the first immersion in the sacred space. For instance, in "Poem in October" the snail that symbolizes home (church and the castle) is transitioned into an owl as shown in line 34: "Brown as owls", indicating thus the path to the poet's future projection. Another poem, "A Winter's Tale", is significant because of its description of a rite of passage. Prior to the initiatic experience, significantly, the owl sends its warning: "the far owl warning among the folds" (7-8), and by doing so, it introduces the first hint that something praeternatural is likely to occur in later stanzas. Later, in "Lament", the owl points the way to the realm of magic: the forest, "I tiptoed shy in the gooseberry wood, / the rude owl cried like a telltale tit" (4-5). The wood, considered *nemeton* or sacred space, was regarded with reverence by the Celts, as recorded in *Senchus Mor* and *Capitulatio de Partibus Saxaonie* (Kendrick, 1997: 197).[20]

Another symbol, the cock, adjusts to the figurative values that the Celts, particularly in Gaul, associated with it. The emblematic connotations acquired by the rooster in Celtic texts are identified in three different anthropological *strata*, namely life, fertility and war. As "the announcer of the new day, embodying the active side of life" (Heinz, 1998: 93), the cock is highly regarded in Thomas's poems. This is the case of "Our Eunuch Dreams", where the cock is invested with powers over life and death: "For we shall be a shouter, like the cock, / blowing the old dead back" (37-38). Similarly, in "Especially when the October wind", the poet alludes to the power that "flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning and tells the windy weather in the cock" (18-20). Secondly, as "a symbol of lust for love and life and of fertility" (Heinz, 1998: 93), the man is compared in "Altarwise by Owl-Light", to "Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg" (8), and in "Over Saint John's Hill" Thomas links the color code and the opposite forces of nature in "green cocks and hens" (55). Finally, the fighting qualities of this animal,

recognized in the Celtic tradition, are depicted in "If my head hurt a hair's foot" in reference to "All game phrases fit your ring of a cockfight" (6), and later in "I, in my intricate image", where the cock is placed in the context of a "decaying army, / The sexton centinel, garrisoned under thistles, / a cock-on-a-dunghill" (56-58).[21]

As a conclusion to this section on bird symbols, especial mention needs to be made of the water birds that play an important role both in Celtic myth and in Dylan Thomas's poems. Swans are constantly present in secondary stories related to Celtic sagas, such as the story of the children of Lír, Midir the Proud and Étain, the fairy, and the story of Oeghus mac Oc, son of Great Daghda and the Celtic God of Love. Their appearance in texts, like the dove, started to acquire importance from the expansion of Christendom onwards. Possibly, due to its white plumage, swans are now a symbol of purity and divine power, but in the Celtic world, "the transformation into swans, as a form of punishment later became a well-known motif in the European world of fairy tales" (Heinz, 1998: 117). For the most part, "they are capable of destruction, but they are mostly birds of temptation or escape from the Otherworld" (Heinz, 1998: 113).

The mythological implications of this symbol are obvious in the two poems dedicated to the subject of Leda which, although belonging to Greek sagas, prove that Thomas considered myth as a starting point from which to develop his own themes. Such is the case in "Poet: 1935", where the author's considerations about himself are introduced, and later epilogued, by means of a parallelistic construction that reinforces his supernatural nature as a poet and a bard: "See, on gravel paths, under the harpstrung trees / he steps so near the water / that a swan's wing / might play upon his lank locks with its wind" (1-3). This "God's man"(47), capable of "capture more than man or woman guesses" (54) ends the poem with a rhetorical question suggested by the swans: "Who are his friends?"(63), and the answer, implicit in the poem, is nature.[22]

It seems nevertheless obvious that, of all the animal symbols that Thomas deals with, the one that seems to enjoy the privilege of becoming the poet's first choice is the heron. The heron appears in Thomas's later and most frequently analyzed pieces. Thomas seems to discover this animal symbol at a relatively late date, although it acquires a high relevance in the poet's search for eternity. Treatment of the heron in its association with the poetic *persona* is evinced in Thomas's birthday poems. Thus, in "Poem in October" the heron is chosen as an appointed witness to Thomas own biography: "And walked abroad in a shower of all my days. / High tide and the heron dived when I took the road" (16-17). Although in Irish mythology herons associated with Midir the Proud and with the god of sea, Manannan mac Lir, had certain negative connotations (Green 66), the fact is that

in later Celtic sagas, their image would be purified into the opposite value as a bird that "sometimes appeared in allegories of Christians rising above the storms of life, as the herons surmount rainclouds" (Tresidder, 1998: 102).

The continuity of the heron symbolism in yet another of Dylan Thomas's birthday poems, "Poem on his Birthday", affirms the identity of this totemic image of the poet, appointed to carry his soul to eternity, as evinced in the poet's lament: "Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined / And druid herons' vows / The voyage to ruin I must run" (77-79). Those "sacred herons" are made to appear in this poem at the end of the poet's life and, further, they continue to accompany him on his path towards his future, as a symbol of a prospective spiritual success: "Herons walk in their shroud / The livelong river's robe" (27-28). After this earlier statement, the heron becomes a constant in Thomas subsequent work. In "Over Saint John's Hill" Thomas elaborates on the initial idea that takes the heron for a good omen and now invests the bird with a sacred veil: "and slowly, the fishing holy stalking heron / in the river Towy below bows his tilted headstone" (12-13). This "saint heron" (37), a soul mate during the poet's journey, can be found five more times in this long poem, "The heron and I"(35, 42), being the recurrent phrase that evokes communion between their souls.

In spite of their being numerically the most frequently mentioned animal symbols in Dylan Thomas's poems, birds are not the only icons to be found there. One of the most important non-bird animal symbols illuminating Thomas's stanzas is the worm. Contrary to what might be expected, the worm becomes for Thomas a symbol of positive catastrophe, as David Daiches asserts when commenting on "A Refusal to Mourn": "We need not wince at the suggestion that "long friends" means (among other things) worms; worms for Thomas were not disgusting, but profoundly symbolic: like maggots they are elements of corruption and thus of reunification, of eternity" (1966: 19). In such poems as "Written for a Personal Epitaph" and "Before I knocked", the worm is associated with the images of the womb and life after death, thus implying the relevance of this symbol as a transformer of dead matter into living spirit. As was the case in Celtic Ireland where "worms feature as ancestral emblems, taking up the symbolism of larval metamorphosis" (Tresidder, 1998: 231), the worm becomes thus, not only a destroyer of human flesh, but an agent of the living cycle through its function as an inducer of the fusion between the corpse and nature. This is the sense of lines 5 and 6 in "A Process of the Weather of the Heart": "Blood in their suns / Lights up the living worm" as it is in the closing lines of "The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower": "And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb / How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm" (21-22).[23]

Interestingly enough, this symbol is primarily associated with the serpent. While in Christendom the snake becomes a symbol of the Devil (due to its role in the myth of Genesis), earlier in heathendom, the serpent had acquired a different set of values altogether. The snake is a mysterious symbol in Celtic myth although, as a matter of fact, not a single snake has ever been found in Ireland; this is a fact that Irish legend explains by alleging that Saint Patrick expelled them from the Irish soil, thus using again the Biblical symbol as a metaphor for the Christianization of pagan territories. The serpent is, nevertheless, one of the most important symbols in Western lore due to its reference to life and fertility: "Emblematically, the snake was in touch with the mysteries of the earth, the waters, darkness and the underworld" (Tresidder, 1998: 184). The capacity of this animal to change its skin favours its suitability as a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation, as Thomas proves in "Altarwise by Owl-light": "Pour like a halo on the caps and serpents. / This was the resurrection in the desert" (118-119), and in "O Chatterton": "Life neat's a better poison than in a bottle, / a better venom seethes in spittle / than one could probe out of a serpent's guts" (5-7).[24] Not only is Thomas's snake remarkable for projecting the idea of rebirth, as the Celts believed, but also for setting up a correspondence with the water cult (Heinz, 1998: 23), as he does, for instance in "Where Once the Waters in your Face": "There shall be corals in your beds / There shall be serpents in your tides, / Till all our sea-faiths die" (22-24), and later in "Poem on His Birthday": "And far at sea he knows / who slaves to his crouched eternal end / under a serpent cloud" (30-32). As an ambivalent symbol, the snake "equally create[s] and destroy[s]" (Heinz, 1998: 26) according to the rhythm of the seasons, and as such, it personifies the Lord of the Otherworld. It is precisely as this character that Welsh myth established "the connection between snakes and dragons [which] is presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth in The Prophecies of Merlin" (Heinz, 1998: 27).

On the other hand, Thomas seems to admit a symbiotic relationship between the worm as a converter of flesh and the bird as a soul-bearer. Thus, in "I See the Boys of Summer", the "The bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp" (35) combines its action with that of the birds in line 39, and in "Request to Leda" the worm that appears in a parallel construction in lines 3 and 9 complements the bird in line 4 that is contrasted to William Empson: "Not your winged lust but his must now change suit" (6), this change alluding to the character's death.[25] Their respective functions become thus complementary: the worm acts as an agent that induces the fusion of the human being into mother earth; later, the bird carries his soul into the Otherworld. Together, they fulfill the three steps in the rite of passage: death, transition and resurrection.

The identification of the archetypal structure in the poems analyzed, together with the analysis of the symbol as considered individually, confirm the Celtic tradition

of the animal symbol. It is a fact that druidic religion established a bi-directional relationship between this world and the next: "Los celtas no temían a la muerte, la consideraban tan sólo como un momento en mitad del largo camino de la vida, un cambio de estado tras el cual continuaba la existencia" (García Casado, 1995: 66). The spiritual connection should be satisfied through a rite of passage aiming to return the human soul to god-nature. By so doing, the living cycle was completed and a step towards the understanding of the abstract nature of Cosmos was also taken. The identification between man and animal intervenes to stress the connection between the human group and the animal group, considered, as a whole, as a further manifestation of a pantheistic vision of God.

Of the animals preferred by the Celts many were used by Dylan Thomas in his poetry. The fish, for example, with its classical association with "fecundity, sexual happiness and the phallus" (Tressider, 1998: 83), becomes a symbol of the fertility of water in Thomas's poems. This is earlier seen in "Then was my Neophyte" where the "water sex" (11) is related to "labyrinths" (13) "furled on the fishes' house and hell" (17); and it is also extended to the dolphin that is present in "Where once the Waters of Your Face" associated with "The lovebeds of the weeds; / the weed of love left dry" (14-15), and to the eels that show an evident sexual symbolism: "Give over, lovers, locking, and the seawax struggle / Love like a mist or fire through the bed of eels" (89-90). In Celtic tradition, however, the fish carried an additional value as "bodies of transformation and later become carriers of souls, such as that of Cú Roi" (Heinz, 1998: 131); this peculiarity in Welsh mythology is associated with the rite of passage experienced by a mythical bard called Gwion Bach (Taliesin). These values are necessarily considered by Thomas in "Poem in October": "Summer time of the dead whispered the truth of his joy / to the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide" (56-57), and in "Ears in the Turrets Hear": "No birds or flying fish / disturbs the island's rest" (15-16).

Similar to this case is that of the horse. In "Rain Cuts the Place we Tread", Thomas proposes the symbol of the horse as an announcer and a soul-bearer. The starting point here is the image of fountain water that represents baptism into a new life: "Rain cuts the place we tread, / a sparkling fountain for us / with no fountain boy but me" (1-3), and later progresses to the idea of an ending: "And, as we watch, the rainbow's foot / stamps on the ground / A legendary horse with hoof and feather, / impatient to be off" (15-18). This is a support necessary to emphasize the concept of transcendence, which is the objective that the poet aimed at: "Our boat is made to rise / By waves which grow again / Their own melodious height, / Into the rainbow's shy embrace" (32-35). This poem proves the validity of the horse as a "sun sign, which is also associated with the water cult, combining in itself life and death (development, healing, rejuvenation)" (Heinz, 1998: 37).

The importance of the horse in Celtic territories largely explains the number of divinities (belonging to all provinces of Celtia) that adopt this symbol as their personal emblem. We can name Mebhdh,[26] Macha and Étain as well as Eochaid Ollathir (also known as Great Daghda, the Irish *Dispater*);[27] in Welsh legend, we can cite the case of Rhiannon and "a cycle of Welsh triads, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, is concerned exclusively with the horses of British rulers and at the same time reflects Celtic color symbols" (Heinz, 1998: 39). Finally, in Gaul, the horse notably decorates the apparitions of the universal mother goddess, Epona,[28] who "was worshipped in the 1st through 4th centuries A.D. from Britain to North Africa, and her feast day was held on December 18th" (Heinz, 1998: 37). Most importantly, "she accompanies those she protects throughout life and into the Otherworld. For this, the horse later receives wings. Life and the birth and the death of heroes are therefore bound together to the life of the horse" (Heinz, 1998: 39).

This long tradition of the symbol was understood by Thomas, who uses its value as an announcer of approaching death and as a conveyor of souls into the Otherworld. As an epithome of time and eternity and, therefore, the sun of eternal life, this symbol can be analyzed in four poems, namely "Rain Cuts the Place we Tread", "Today this Insect", "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait" and "Fern Hill". Both in "Rain Cuts the Place we Tread" and "Today this Insect" the poet becomes increasingly concerned with time and its natural consequences: "Death: death of Hamlet and the nightmare madmen, / And air-drawn windmill on a wooden horse" (19-20). In "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait", however, the horse is linked to the fish in order to stress the idea of death and subsequent rebirth: "She longs among horses and angels, / The rain-bow fish bend in her joys, / Floated the lost cathedral / Chimes of the rocked buoys" (33-36). Finally, in "Fern Hill" the movement of the sun, marks the successive steps of an initiation that goes beyond death: "All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars / flying with the ricks, and the horses / Flashing into the dark". These horses intervene anew under a different sun, once the new cosmic dimension has been reached and, therefore, they are not associated with death now, but with the idea of rebirth: "And the sun grew round that very day. / So it must have been after the birth of a simple light / in the first spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm" (29-31).[29]

The animal symbols considered so far amount to a considerable number of references in the context of Thomas's poetry. Yet, Thomas's stanzas contain a wider variety of animal symbology that, notwithstanding its lesser exploitation by the poet, it certainly participates in Celtic myth and beliefs. One example of this kind of symbols is the deer. Thomas's takes this emblem of the Celtic god Cernunnos (the Irish Conall Cernach) Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed and even Merlin (Heinz, 1998: 49),[30] and he borrows the values from Celtic myth, making it function as a "symbol associated with the East, dawn, light, purity, regeneration, creativity and spirituality" (Tresidder, 1998: 62). With this meaning, the deer makes its most important appearance in two pieces: in "Hold Hard, These Ancient Minutes in the Cuckoo's Month", the deer is endowed with the qualities of summer: light and fertility, "the deer fall in their tracks, / This first and steepled season, to the summer's game" (11-12). In "Song", the deer becomes the center of a magic triangle that confronts him with the tigress in the fertility game and with the mole in its association with summer light: "Love me, as loves the mole his darkness / and the timid deer his tigress" (13-14).

Cattle also appear in Thomas's production as an expression of fertility. Cows, for example were the emblems of the Celtic goddess Brigit, an anthropomorphic representation of the mother goddess, who was also known as the white cow.[31] "In the White Giant's Thigh" Thomas intimates that cows, like deer, were associated with fertility rites and rebirth in conjunction with the female principle. The poem is directly concerned with the idea of transcendence as achieved through sex: "the night's eternal, curving act"(9), hence its images of lust: "The horned bucks climb / quick in the wood at love" (32-33) and of anatomy: "Their breasts full of honey" (37). In this context, the intermingled images of the human hero and the divine cow goddess are used to depict the very act of man entering eternity: "Light on his thighs, spreadeagle to the dunghill sky, / Or with their orchard man in the core of the sun's bush / Rough as cows' tongues and thrashed with brambles their buttermilk" (23-25).

In the same poem, Thomas uses a different symbol of transmigration, largely used in "cultic rituals connected with agricultural fertility" (Tresidder, 1998: 151): "Hill. Who once in the gooseskin winter loved all ice leaved / In the courter's lanes, or twined in the ox roasting sun" (12-13). The ox becomes thus a pre-announced image of rebirth, as present in "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait": "The cattle graze on the covered foam, / The hills have footed the waves away" (183-184), linked to the symbols of water, horse and birds (gulls) as soul-bearers. Once the connotations are established, the poet reveals the authentic nature of the symbol that affects, once more, the rite of passage: "The furious ox-killing house of love" (200). Furthermore, the classical value that Thomas draws from Celtic myth and later pours into this symbol is evinced in a meaningful stanza belonging to "I, in my intricate image":

> This is the fortune of manhood: the natural peril,
> A steeplejack tower, bonerailed and masterless,
> No death more natural;
> Thus the shadowless man or ox, and the pictured devil,

In seizure of silence commit the dead nuisance:
The natural parallel (19-24).

Close relative to the cow and the ox is the bull, which Thomas similarly borrows from Celtic myth in "Lament". In this instance that "Or hickory bull in milky glass" (41) stands for "power, potency —a protean symbol of divinity, royalty and the elemental forces of nature" (Tresidder, 1998: 31), as it does in "Ceremony after a Fire Raid" where the bull is compared to Christian *personae*: "I know not whether / Adam or Eve, or the adorned holy bullock / or the white ewe lamb / Or the chosen Virgin / Laid in her snow / On the Altar of London / Was the first to die" (33-39).[32] This poem contains a clear reference to the white bull as a sacrificial animal in heathen Celtia, as opposed to Biblical figures, before and after the appearance of sin. It is not surprising that its outstanding value in Celtic economy has caused it to become an ever present symbol that stars in the most common type of bardic structure: the *táin* or cattle raid.[33]

It is precisely an ever famous text of this kind, the *Táin Bó Cualgney*, that helps us introduce another of Thomas's symbols: the hound. In the *Táin*, the solar hero Cuchulainn, is fostered into the clan of the hound through his relationship with Culann, the smith.[34] This common association is taken into account by Thomas in "Out of the Pit": "loved dogs and women / I have desired the circle of the sun" (72-73). In a different poem, "Hold Hard, these Ancient Minutes in the Cuckoo's Month", Thomas portrays the dog: "Time, in a folly's rider, like a county man / Over the vault of ridings with his hound at heel" (4-5) as a symbol of healing and also of loyalty and protection: "Dogs are benign symbols in Celtic iconography, the companions of many goddesses associated with healing, and of hunters and warriors" (Tresidder, 1998: 65). In "The Hunchback in the Park", however, the connotations remain on the male side that "stands for hunting, fighting and death or its announcement" (Heinz, 1998: 71). The poor beggar living in the park thus represents the beaten soul of a dog in the moments previous to his murder, which becomes symbolic in the embodiment of swans: "And the old dog sleeper / Alone between nurses and swans" (25-26).

The hound is a good example of the relationship between the presence of animal symbols and a cultural tendency towards totemism. In fact, it becomes easy to observe the survival of such cultural patterns in Thomas's prolific use of animal symbology. We know for certain, that in the cultural fusion known as Celtic civilization gods were not organized in a pantheon with sub-divided areas of influence, and consequently, animal emblems were essential to figure the particularity of the divinity that was being celebrated. Yet, the fact that animals were pictured with deities in all Celtic areas, does not imply the existence of animal worship. We must listen to Freud, who detects a link between the presence of the

totem animal as associated with a clan or a tribe, and a prohibition related to it (Freud, 1970: 9). This religious prohibition or taboo was called in Old Gaelic *geis*, and *gessa* are well-documented, as in the example of Cuchulainn.[35] Cuchulainn was a solar hero born of Dechtire, the sun god Lugh Lamfhada being his father. His real name was Sétanta,[36] but he received his nickname after an episode when he killed Culann's, the smith's, hound becoming thus the boy, Culann's apprentice: "I [Cuchulainn] will be your hound, and guard yourself and your beasts" (Kinsella, 1988: 84). *Cú* means "dog" in Gaelic and the same root is to be found in his uncle's name, king Conchobar. Not surprisingly, one of the *gessa* imposed on Cuchulainn consisted of a prohibition to eat dog meat, which he did right before his death. This is one of the main characteristics of totemism: the prohibition is sacred and must be observed, and if it is ignored the consequences are catastrophic.

The application of this theory to Dylan Thomas's production is now evident. Blake builds up symbols as connectors between reality and vision, while Yeats aims at full allegory when representing mythical time and space in his animal symbols. Yet, only Hughes and Thomas go beyond the metaphor: the poem, Hughes says, is not LIKE an animal; the poem IS an animal. Thomas shares this view and undergoes a process of mythical transformation enabling him to impersonate the inner qualities of the animal himself. By becoming part of the animal soul, Thomas gives full scope to the Celtic notion of a bardic poet.

That Thomas uses a great variety of animal imagery is evident to anyone who reads his poetry; that those images are genuine poetic symbols was argued earlier in this article; that the tradition of the symbol is Celtic in its origin, constitutes the core discussion throughout these pages. The last question is whether the spiritual belief that led to the multiplication of animal symbols, finds some sort of projection in Thomas's work. Our final answer is certainly in the affirmative.

In the first place, the values of the animal symbols in Thomas's verse correspond both in their use and in their symbolic values to those found in Celtic texts. In other words, their appearances complement in the author's notion of the symbol. Secondly, the same animal symbol bearing the same pagan values is perfectly integrated into Thomas's modernist universe, which leads the reader to the conclusion that the metaphysical values it proclaims are universal. Thomas seems to perceive a continuous line from his forefathers to his present self. Finally, the presence of rites of passage, as observed in "A Winter's Tale", is highly indicative of the mythological transcendence of the truth that Thomas, as a bard, is about to reveal. One must point out that in the famous case of the Welsh bard Taliesin his coming to the 'light of knowledge' (in Gaelic, *Imbas Forosnai*) was reached after a triple transformation into a hare, a fish and a bird —and eventually, into a grain of wheat (Rolleston, 1994: 414), representing the four elements: earth, wind, water

and fire. Not only does Thomas employ animals anthropologically symbolizing all four elements, but most importantly, he declares himself a bard, as he proves in many of his poems in an attempt to echo the Welsh concern for the relation between the individual and God.[37]

Dylan Thomas was an outstanding poet whose contribution to universal literature is undoubted. Part of his greatness came from his inspirational force and part of it came from his peculiar profile as an individual. Thomas's concern with the individual self, his internal conflict and his spiritual survival to physical death justifies the selection of his three main subjects, namely, childhood, sex and religion. All of them cautiously revert to the central figure of the poet that sends his message to the world by means of a combination of synthesis, dualism and symbolism. Paradoxically, however, his animal symbology is not a unique elaboration of Dylan Thomas's own self but rather, it becomes an individual expression of the traditional Welsh pantheistic concern for the relationship between the individual and God.

Notes

[1]. Theological view based on the belief that the universe is controlled by the opposing powers of good and evil.

[2]. Theory based on the belief that God and the universe are the same reality.

[3]. "The second battle of Moytura took place on a plain in the North of Co. Sligo. [...]. The battle with the Formorians is related with an astounding wealth of marvellous incident" (Rolleston, 1994: 116).

[4]. This is a very well known episode, also existing in Greek myth. Gwydyon's brother, Amaethon, had stolen from Arawn the secrets of agriculture. Gwydyon transformed the Breton army into trees with the aid of magical powers in an attempt to help his brother and, eventually, won the fight by guessing his opponent's real name (Markale, 1992: 104).

[5]. Dylan Thomas uses color so much that he has even been compared to Rimbaud: "The poetry of Dylan Thomas has obviously much in common with that of Rimbaud and Hopkins, and with the word expedients of conventional surrealism as well" (Bayley, 1966: 140).

[6]. Just as common is the incidence of parallelistic structures, as in "Request to Leda": "The worm is (pin-point) rational in the fruit" (3) or figures of repetition, as in "Greek Play on a Garden: "Among the garden trees a pigeon calls / A pigeon calls and women talk of death" (29-30).

[7]. The complete list is very long: albatross, animal, bat, bear, beast, bee, beetle, birds, blackbird, bug, bull, camel, calf, cat, chameleon, chicken, cock, cockles, cow, crab, crane, crocodile, crow, cuckoo, deer, dogs, dolphin, donkey, dove, duck, eagle, eels, fish, fleas, flies, fox, goat, goose, gull, hen, heron, herring, horse, hounds, hyena, insect, kangaroo, lamb, leech, lice, lion, lizard, maggot, magpie, mammoth, mole, mouse, mule, mussel, nightingale, octopus, ox, owl, pelican, pheasant, pig, pigeon, rat, raven, seal, serpent, sheep, snail, snake, sparrow, spider, squirrel, swan, swine, tiger, toad, whale, wolf, worm.

[8]. Images are metaphors and, consequently, they are spontaneous, intense and are susceptible of emotional potential, but they do not represent a conventional substitution of the referent.

[9]. Although birds are favorite symbols in Celtic mythology, their incidence increased in pagan texts as a consequence of the progress made by early monks in the evangelization of Ireland.

[10]. This relates both to their presence in the summer and to their symbolism associated with the idea of "rebirth", for example in "The Spire Cranes": "Those craning birds are choice for you, songs that jump back / To the built voice, or fly with winter to the bells / But do not travel down dumb wind like prodigals" (14-16).

[11]. Remarkably, this poem shows a very strong influence of the Welsh poem "Cad Goddeu" as in line 10: "On the horizon walking like the trees" and later in lines 14 and 15: "Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches, / Some of the oaken voices, from the roots" (13-14).

[12]. "The birds then which you see in the trees", he said, "are the souls of my children and my kindred, both women and men who are yonder awaiting Doomsday" (Oskamp, 1970: 139).

[13]. Chart III. Sections 57 to 61 (Propp, 1972: 182).

[14]. Poems portraying generic bird symbols are very numerous. For further reference, there can be suggested: "We Will Be Conscious of Our Sanctity", "No Thought can Trouble my Unwholesome Pose", "No Pigeon, I'm Too Wise", "It's light that Makes the Intervals", "I know this vicious minute's hour", "The Morning Space for Leda", "The Spire Cranes", "Youth Calls to Age", "No Man Believes", "The Woman Speaks", "The Sun Burns the Morning", "I See the Boys of Summer", "I, in my Intricate Image", "Do You Not Father Me", "Altarwise by Owl-Light", "Foster the Light", "How Shall my Animal", "Because Pleasure-Bird Whistles", "Unluckily for Death", "Once Below a Time", "There was a Saviour", "The Countryman's Return", "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait", "Love in the Asylum", "The Hunchback in the Park", "New Quay", "Vision and Prayer", "This Side of the Truth", "In Country Sleep", "In the White Giant's Thigh", "Poem on his Birthday" and "In Country Heaven".

[15]. The incidence of the last two symbols in Thomas's poetry is not essential to his work. The dove was introduced in Celtic tradition only after the influence of early Christianity was felt and consequently, although referred to in Celtic texts, it is not essentially genuine material. The goose was considered by the Celts as a holy animal that was associated with warriors and, less generically, "in the Welsh tradition, the appearance of geese in the night is an evil omen, since they were then viewed as witches" (Heinz, 1998: 121). Both of them have a marginal incidence in Thomas's poems. In addition to their number being insignificant, their appearance is mostly connected with other farm animals, and they do not have the symbolic values above mentioned. For further reference, see "To Follow the Fox", "We Have the Fairy Tales by heart", "The Hand that Signed the Paper", "Because Pleasure Bird Whistles", "A Winter's Tale", "In Country Sleep", "On the Marriage of a Virgin" and "Lament", regarding both symbols.

[16]. For further reference, see "Pillar Breaks", "The Air you Breathe", "Greek Play on a Garden" and "Into her Lying Down Head".

[17]. The name of this character means "lion".

[18]. For example, in *Imram Brain*: "Fosceird iar sen a muir n-aill cosmuill fri nell 7 andar leosom nis faelsad fein nach an curach" (Oskamp, 1970: 144). Translation: "Thereafter, they came into another sea like a cloud and it seemed to them that it would not

support themselves nor the boat" (Oskamp, 1970: 145).

[19]. Belonging to "I have Come to Catch your Voice".

[20]. Other piecess in which Thomas uses the figure of the owl with similar connotations are "Altar-wise by owl light", "Foster the Light", "Once below a time", "Ballad of the long-legged bait", "Fern Hill", "In Country Sleep", "Over Sir John´s Hill" and "In the White Giant´s Thigh".

[21]. For further reference see this symbol in "In Country Sleep", "A Winter's Tale" and "Fern Hill".

[22]. The validity of swans as soul-bearers is later proved in "The Hunchback in the Park" where the association of the homeless with swans alerts the reader to the tragic ending of this character's life as a consequence of human intolerance (26).

[23]. For further reference, see "Here in this Spring", "Our Eunuch Dreams", "Especially when the October Wind", "All, All and All the Dry Worlds Lever" and "If my Head Hurts a Hair's Foot".

[24]. Together with the above mentioned Celtic symbolism, there coexists the already mentioned Christian symbolism, ever present in Thomas's work through his Welsh chapel learning in such poems as "Out of the Pit", "Grief Thief of Time", "Incarnate Devil" and "Today, This Insect".

[25]. For further reference, see "High on a Hill", "Here in this Spring", "Especially when the October Wind", "When I Woke" and "Ceremony after a Fire Raid".

[26]. Marriage with a horse was part of a ritual called "Sacral Kingship". In the case of this queen of Connaught, she married Eochaid Dala.

[27]. Although their society had matriarchal roots, the Celts believed in the existence of a superior male deity of foreign origin. This god, was earlier associated with the earth goddess as a consort and later developed a mythology of his own.

[28]. The name of this goddess refers to her function, since "epos" means "horse" in Celtic "p", or Britonic Celtic, as oppossed to the same animal name translated as "Equos" in Gaelic Celtic.

[29]. Unlike other animal symbols, the value of which coexisted in Thomas's work with that of other traditions (namely, Biblical references), in the case of the horse, its use is that it mainly had in the Celtic tradition. For further reference, see "The Ploughman´s Gone", "Because Pleasure Bird Whistle", "Poem in October", "A Winter´s Tale" and "The Song of the Mischievous Dog".

[30]. According to the Welsh tale of Gereint.

[31]. In Wales, it is Achren who, appearing naked during the battle, is called a shameless cow.

[32]. For further reference, see "Grief Thief of Time" and "A Saint about to Fall".

[33]. Celtic economy was based mainly on cattle breeding.

[34]. This association appears in a great number of other legendary characters such as Cú Roi, Conchobhar and the Welsh Llewelyn, owner of Gelert, the dog.

[35]. Freud mentions *The Book of Rights*, the oldest copies of which date from 1390 and 1418, as the manuscript containing the fullest collection of *gessa* (Freud, 1970: 66).

[36]. A warrior's real name was in itself a *geis* that should be kept secret in order to avoid negative magic. There are only three extant examples of real names that have been preserved: one of them is Cuchulainn, another one is that of the god father, Great Daghda, whose real name was Eochaid Ollathair, and the last one belongs to Finn mac Cumhaill, whose real name was Demne (Rolleston, 1994: 255).

[37]. For example, "Poet: 1935", "Especially When the October Wind", "Over Sir John´s Hill" and "After the Funeral".

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SENTIMENTAL COMEDY IN MARTIN AMIS'S "STATE OF ENGLAND" AND "THE COINCIDENCE OF THE ARTS"

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Although Martin Amis has been a well-established writer since the publication of *The Rachel Papers* in 1973, his latest work of fiction *Heavy Water and Other Stories*, released in 1998,[1] has attracted surprisingly scarce critical response. This is partly due to the fact that this collection, comprising nine short stories culled between 1975 and 1997, appears somewhat fragmented when compared to *Einstein's Monsters*, Amis's first attempt at short fiction, which deals with the nuclear threat. Yet, while this might be regarded as a structural flaw that explains the paucity of critical texts, some of the unflattering comments made by reviewers remain unjustified. For instance, in her scathing review entitled "Fat Men, Thin Lives", Natasha Walter finds fault with the supposed grossness of most stories, the ludic component of which allegedly fails to elicit the reader's involvement: "You know these tales aren't about you, really; and though you can sit down and spend an hour playing some game with them, you know that, in the end, it's exactly that: a game" (Walter 1998: 82). The only compliment paid to the collection concerns Amis's style, an opinion shared by Thomas Smyth in *World Literature Today* ("Language here is Amis's strongest suit" [Smyth 2000: 155]) or by Tom Shone in *The Times Literary Supplement*: "when he is writing well, his sentences appear to have written themselves" (Shone 1998: 21).

Such slightly disparaging analyses do not however do justice to the contents of this collection. Since it is impossible, given the restriction of space, to examine the nine

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stories, this article will attempt to explore "State of England" and "The Coincidence of the Arts" —the longest and arguably the most complex texts of the collection— with a view to presenting the similarities and differences these stories bear with regard to the conventions of sentimental comedy, which will enable us to shed light on the aesthetic and ethical choices that underlie Amis's recent production.

In *Sentimental Comedy: Theory & Practice*, Frank H. Ellis describes sentimental comedy as a hybrid subgenre which "rouses the comic 'sympathy and ridicule' *plus* the sentimental reaction" (Ellis 1991: 22) by depicting antagonistic and funny — though sometimes painful— situations which, while eliciting laughter, also favour sentimental reactions through the representation of pathos and empathy with the plight of others. The "sentimental reaction", Ellis argues, is grounded in the representation of "a spectrum of attitudes reaching from pity for a non-existing object at one extreme to pity for all humanity at the other", intermediate attitudes including "pity for the poor", "pity for slaves", "pity for self", or "pity for dead father" (Ellis 1991: 4-5). In *Sensibility: An Introduction*, Janet Todd, who uses the terms "sentimentality" and "sensibility" as synonyms, states that the paramount criterion for sentimental literature is that it "buttonholes the reader and demands an emotional, even physical, response" thanks to the "arousal of pathos through conventional situations, stock familial characters and rhetorical devices" (Todd 1986: 3). Pathos is also elicited through the spectacle of undeserved distress undergone by victims "whose misery is demanded by their predicament as defenceless women, aged men, helpless infants or melancholic (sic) youths" (Todd 1986: 3). Although sentimental literature is oftentimes discarded on the grounds that it suggests "an indulgence in and display of emotion for its own sake beyond the stimulus and beyond propriety" (Todd 1986: 8), the connection between sentimental comedy and "overt moralizing" (Ellis 1991: 20) is manifest: "In all forms of sentimental literature, there is an assumption that life and literature are directly linked, not through any notion of a mimetic depiction of reality but through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one" (Todd 1986: 4).

If Martin Amis has been unanimously lauded for his comic talent,[2] is it at all possible to reconcile the features of sentimental comedy with Amis's supposedly cynical fiction?[3] To try to demonstrate that "State of England" and "The Coincidence of the Arts" are informed by sentimental comedy, we will first analyse the comic vein of these texts before assessing how sentimental victimisation foregrounds eschatological concerns. We will finally appraise the paradoxical patterns of reconciliation federating both stories.

Penned in demotic language, "State of England" is a proletarian comedy that depicts the sexual, racial and social humiliation of Big Mal, a lumpen bouncer who feels *déclassé* and alienated in a multi-ethnic England while attempting to come to terms with his estranged wife, Sheilagh, his Asian mistress, Linzi, and his son, Little Jet. For instance, the insight which Mal and his "mate" Bern give into the game lost by their sons is couched in hilarious slangy journalese: "They agreed it was small fucking wonder their boys had taken a caning: nine-nil. The defense was crap and midfield created fuck-all" (37). Because of the subversion inherent in terms of abuse, Mal's excessive second-hand harangue,[4] targeted at nobody in particular and as such harmless, reinforces the bonds between Bern and Mal, thereby fostering a harmonious sense of working class connivance,[5] further consolidated by Bern's degrading anecdote about the Queen's supposed sexual intercourse with an intrusive commoner: "'They reckon he fucked her. Reckon he gave her one'" (37). By decrowning the emblem of the British monarchy, Bern's Rabelaisian distancing from the establishment, what Ward Parks would call an "other-oriented attack" in an "inter-societal context" (Parks 1986: 445), contributes to transforming "State" into a "condition of England" comedy in which the proletarian point of view that is privileged relentlessly satirises the other half of the nation, i.e. the aristocracy.

Although Rodney Peel, an English baronet adrift on the New York art scene, is the focaliser of "Coincidence", this story lampoons the aristocracy too. "Coincidence" satirically relates the artistic and racial rivalry which pits Sir Rodney against Pharsin Courier, a Black janitor and part-time novelist.[6] The vicarious class war breaks out when Pharsin vilifies Rodney's procrastination: "'This is a farce, man. Have you read my novel yet?'" (78). The story's beginning *in medias res* immediately links Pharsin's pent-up anger with a literary genre eliciting laughter on the part of the reader, a connection phonetically reinforced by the very name of the enunciator. The climax of "Coincidence" is moreover constituted by the confrontation between the cuckold husband and Rodney, a coup de théâtre dramatised by Pharsin's explosive anger: "'OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR RIGHT NOW'" (105). The countdown fosters a sense of danger made more explicit by Pharsin's physical threat: "YOU GOT ONE MINUTE. THEN I RIP THIS DOOR OFF THE FUCKING WALL. SIXTY. FIFTY-NINE. FIFTY-EIGHT'" (105). Yet the paroxystic fight between a descendant of David and a Goliath of a man is bathetically defused by Rodney's extolling but hackneyed comments on Pharsin's artistic mastery, which eventually strengthens comedy. It is when the paroxysm of *agon*, with mock physical violence, is reached that Amis's satirical comedy reaches its apex, or, as Ronald Shusterman has demonstrated with reference to a Monty Python sketch, "a world of utter contradiction, filled with insults, frustration, linguistic aggression [...]" may give rise to a joyous aesthetic experience (Shusterman 2002: 123).

In "Coincidence", Martin Amis therefore pens a "condition of America" story that evinces the conflicting existence of two nations separated both by monetary status and racial differences. Antagonism is further materialised by Pharsin's *ad hominem* attacks launched against Rodney: "What's the fucking title?" (83); "Bullshit!" when Rodney is unable to tell him the correct title (86) or "I keep hearing about these goddamn wines you got" (103) when Rodney patronisingly promises to discuss Pharsin's novel after a Platonic banquet or *comissatio*. Because they function as cathartic mechanisms of retaliation that delay brawls, the agonistic dialogues of "Coincidence" are akin to what is known in Afro-American folklore as "the dozens"[7] especially since Pharsin, a black American, is infuriated by what he perceives as Rodney's deliberate scorn:

> 'Well what the fuck's the story, Rod? You read my novel yet or what? [...] Now this is basically some *rude shit* we're looking at here. Why the contempt, Rod? What's your answer?' (93).

Resorting to the rhetorical device of the *quaesitio*, Pharsin's oral belligerence contrasts with Rodney's equanimity grounded in "a *strategy of cool*" and "a *strategy of measured response*", typical of "the dozens" (Garner 1983: 51). Amis comically adapts tools characteristic of US fiction, which throws into relief the persistent American filiation of his prose.[8]

Nonetheless, Amis's comic portrayal of class war does not univocally sympathise with proletarians, thus refusing to endorse wholeheartedly the "pity of the poor" typical of sentimental works. Indeed, proletarians also are caricatured, as is instanced by Mal's and Sheilagh's domestic quarrel:

> 'Now give me my fucking money.'
> '*Whoff* fucking money?'
> 'Whoff fucking money? *My* fucking money' (33).

Thanks to the almost mechanical repetition of the phrase "fucking money", their verbal parrying, based on epiphora and heightened by stichomythia, causes the reader to laugh at the expense of the characters. *Agon*, instrumentalised to reveal the existence of sharp social contrasts, serves comedy and Amis's satirical intents which are directed at the class system since both the aristocrats and the proletarians are laughed at. This condemnation is aesthetically heightened by Amis's creativity illustrated by the deviant spelling mirroring Mal's and Sheilagh's substandard pronunciation. The adversarial dialogue between Mal and Sheilagh provides an embryonic example of "flyting", a term that designates, according to Ward Parks, "an exchange of insults and boasts between two heroes in some public setting, such as the mead-hall or the battle-field" (Parks 1986: 441). On account of the

inarticulateness of both debaters, the "flyting", frequent in epic narratives, is necessarily reduced to a minimum and transposed to the modern arena of the sports field. The generic ambiguity of "State" is thus manifest since it is a comedy which transposes the serious subgenre of "condition of England" novels onto which are grafted, via the "flyting", mock epic modalities which are more in accord with what has been called the postmodern condition. Furthermore, the double geographical setting in "Coincidence" eventually allows Martin Amis to broaden his scope and deliver a piece of short fiction comically describing the "condition of the Western world" at the end of the millennium, which further evidences continuity since it confirms Karl Miller's intuition that "Martin Amis is the latest of Anglo-American dualistic artists" (Miller 1987: 410).

Yet these stories are problem pieces in that the themes tackled by Amis —social alienation, artistic rivalry and marital infidelity— are far from being intrinsically hilarious. It proves that Charles Highway's paradoxical motto in *The Rachel Papers* ("The nastier a thing, the funnier it gets" [Amis 1973: 88]) still provides the starting point of Amis's recent fiction —but the starting point only. It is indeed impossible to contend that the dominant tonality in "State" and in "Coincidence" is comical insofar as the surface mock violence cannot totally conceal gloomier cases of physical violence. When laughter occurs, it is always in the dark.

The tenuous borderline between verbal duelling and violence is indeed blurred whenever agonistic dialogues are wedded to physical action, which transforms the victim into a teratological creature: "With fights and fighting, this was ancient knowledge. When you received a wound, you didn't just have to take it, sustain it. You didn't just have to bear it. You also had to wear it, for all to see, until it healed" (35). The deictic pronoun "you" establishes a phatic link with the reader, thus encouraging a process of identification with the victims. Mal's gnomic reflections are programmatic of Mrs Pharsin's stigmata in "Coincidence", which are caused by a nascent domestic conflict ("Soon afterwards he started to find the bruises. / Nothing florid or fulminant. Just a different kind of dark beneath the dark" [101]), the proportions of which increase daily: "the nether lip all smudged and split, and the right cheekbone loudly marked, as if swiped with a hot daub of rouge" (104). The cosmetic metaphor triggers off the reader's pity by foregrounding Mrs Pharsin's outraged femininity. If marital violence is more latent in "State" since Fat Lol's aggressiveness at his virago of a wife remains verbal ("'Shut it!'" [52, 53]), Fat Lol's son, Vic, ironically predestined by his name to be a victim, fears that he might get beaten up ("his son flinching when either parent made a move for the vinegar or the brown sauce" [52-53]), a case of child abuse that is condemned by the text as a vice perpetrated against a defenceless victim, a *topos* of sentimental works.

Yet the texts avoid Manichaeism since aggressive characters are simultaneously depicted as victims. Although it could be interpreted as an instance of carnivalesque poetic justice, Mal's "laceration on the side of his face", after he has been mugged by a group of opera goers (31), is in fact exploited to reinforce the reader's anxiety at the portrait of Great Britain's violence. Metonymically evidenced by Mal's groan of pain ("*A!*") whenever he jams his phone into his sore ear (31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 49, 56, 57), Mal's *corpus dolens* symbolises his *angst*: "*A!* Always it was with him, every hour, like an illness, like a haunting" (34). Mal's pain heralds Pharsin's self-pity: "It's not just me who's hurting-it's everyone around me" (103). Pharsin's weakness, analogous to the tragic hero's *hamartia*, imbues "Coincidence" with sentimental overtones since the pity of the reader for the aggressor is reinforced by the fact that Pharsin himself seems to be the victim of the mad impulse personified by the Greek goddess *Ate* ("'Come on, man. This is getting insane'" [82]), which tones down his responsibility. Such ambivalence symbolises the multi-faceted demands made on the readers by Amis's texts that refuse simplistic formulae.

This microscosmic violence is strengthened by the dystopian traits of contemporary society. New York City indeed sounds more and more like a roaring Bedlam, the white noise of which thwarts human communication ("The city was getting louder every day: even the sirens had to throw a tantrum, just to make themselves heard" [78-79]) or truncates street conversations ("But Pharsin's monosyllable was quite canceled by city stridor —someone detonating a low-yield nuclear weapon or dropping a dumpster from a helicopter" [84-85]). The use of hyperbole shows that harmful commodities turn Amis's urban landscape into an uncanny waste land on the brink of nuclear holocaust. Such rhetoric underscores continuity in Amis's fiction since it illustrates that nuclear weapons —which are, as the author points out in his introduction to *Einstein's Monsters*, "biblical in their anger" (Amis 1987: 2)— constitutes a remanent preoccupation.

If "Coincidence" features a world menaced by nuclear apocalypse, a sense of doom is also recurrent in "State" since natural elements have themselves degenerated into wrathful avengers, recalling the Nemesis of Greek tragedies or the jealous God of the Ancient Testament, as if the Day of Judgement, or *Dies Irae*, was imminent: "The sun was neither hot nor high just incredibly intense, as if you could hear it, the frying roar of its winds. Every year the sun did this, subjecting the kingdom to the fiercest and most critical scrutiny" (40). The world thus dangles perpetually on the brink of apocalyptic chaos, which is not surprising since eschatology constitutes another traditional Amisian theme embodied for instance by "the Crisis" which serves as the backdrop of *London Fields* or by the apocalyptic hints of climate malfunctioning that saturates *The Information*. Contrary to eighteenth-century sentimental works which promote "cosmic optimism" (Ellis 1991: 11),

"State" and "Coincidence" harp on about cosmic pessimism by bringing to the surface so much underlying violence that it eventually cancels out the jovial impression initially conveyed. Faithful to the definition of sentimental comedy, the polytonality of Amis's texts, which juxtaposes two rivalling moods, keeps the reader off balance because he / she knows that, at any time, laughter may erupt from social comedy or else horror and desperation may be produced by a random instance of wanton violence.

Nevertheless, claiming that "State" and "Coincidence" promote either sophisticated laughter or apocalyptic melancholy would fail to take into account the endings of both texts.

Indeed, "State" and "Coincidence" transcend nasty comedy and nihilistic violence by sketching patterns of reconciliation. Marital conflicts are for instance solved since Mal and Sheilagh's marriage is patched up in a highly pathetic scene: "By now Mal had both his arms round his head, like a mouth-organist. Because he was talking into his phone and crying into his sleeve" (55). Metonymically symbolised by Mal's tears, the reconciliation between Mal, presented as the quintessential fin-de-siècle male, and Sheilagh, abbreviated as She (33, 36, 49, 51), stands for the coming together of masculine and feminine allegories. Mrs Pharsin, who no longer exhibits signs of domestic abuse ("her face and her long bare arms were quite free of contusion" [112]), also participates in this renewed lust for life, all the more so since she has given birth to a boy called Julius (112). Generation tensions are moreover eased by Mal's optimistic —if ambiguous— motto based on binary rhythm, alliteration and epizeuxis ("to continue with the next fuck or fight, to continue, to continue" [61]), which is materialised by his agreeing to run for his son in the Fathers' Race. Such unexpected *dénouements* have strong affinity with sentimental works which, for the most part, "function through a plot of sudden reversal" (Todd 1986: 4), especially since Jet stops abusing his father and switches from "'You're a crap sprinter'" to "'You're a *sad* sprinter'" (61-62), a *correctio* that is emblematic of how "State" ultimately instrumentalises pathos to stage a degree of optimism that strikes a surprising note in Amis's usually more lugubrious fiction.

Furthermore, both stories finally stage social and racial concord, best dramatised by the serene ending of "Coincidence", the locus of resolution being a London café where Mrs Pharsin, a commoner, and Rodney, an aristocrat who no longer uses his title (111), gently converse, thus symbolising the erosion of the class system and the restoration of communication. Based on stichomythia, their civilised sociolect, which functions as a "bond-producing interaction" (Parks 1986: 449), is linguistically heightened by multiple echoic devices:

> 'So the rain held off.'
> 'Yeah. It's been nice.'

'Thought it looked like rain earlier.'
'Me too. Thought it was going to piss down.'
'But it held off.'
'Yeah', she said. 'It held off' (113).

The final epiphora suggests consensus, which is reinforced by the circularity of this dialogue conveyed by epanalepsis. Cosmically blessed by the improving weather conditions, their reconciliation echoes the meteorological simile that embodies racial harmony in "State": "he [Mal] had felt wonderfully evolved, like a racial rainbow, ready to encompass a new world" (39). Reminiscent of Miranda's wonder in *The Tempest*, Mal's euphoric sense of integration in a utopian brave new world characterised by multi-culturalism is conveyed by the image of the rainbow, as if the *Homo Cosmopolitanus* constituted the last and perfect stage of the Darwinian chain of evolution.[9]

The social *entente cordiale* between Mrs Pharsin and Rodney also has a strong racial component since it crowns the renewed communication between Blacks and Whites. The pact is sealed off by Rodney's money and phrased in such a way as to suggest that what is at stake is race: "'Take it as…' he searched for the right word. Would 'reparations' answer?'" (113). The noun may be construed as a kind of moral repayment to make up for the persecution endured by the black community in pre-abolition times, as expressed by the ambivalence of Mrs Pharsin's grievances that Rodney recounts to Rock: "It was me. I put those marks on her" (110). Such racial overtones are intensified by the reference linking Rodney's and Rock's family fortune to the slave trade: "But the Peels and the Robvilles alike had flourished at a time when every English adult with cash or credit owned a piece of it: a piece of slavery" (88). The "pity for slaves", a hallmark of sentimental literature, is aroused by Amis's delaying technique that is grounded in the cataphoric use of the pronoun "it", a linguistic trick akin to anaphorical petition. In fact, the ethical imperative underlying Amis's sentimental comedy is univocal in both "State" and "Coincidence" and is arguably more manifest than in his earlier writings, thus evincing a trend towards what may be called lay wisdom literature.[10]

Nevertheless this militancy is buttressed by an exacting aesthetic experience for the reader, which elevates Amis's fiction above mere politically correct propaganda:

> They had a dog called Nigger. Their little black dog, their unofficial mascot, who dies, was called Nigger. You couldn't do that now. No way. In a film. Call a dog *Nigger*? No way, no day. Times change. Call a *black* dog Nigger? No shape, no form. Be down on you like a … Call a dead black dog Nigger in a film? No way José (45).

Mal's jerky interior monologue is based on hypophora, as is evidenced by the three questions that he asks and answers, and on homoioteleuton since José, the Hispanic

Christian name which suggestively ends Mal's reflections on race, rhymes with "way", which itself rhymes with "day". The reader's aesthetic experience, brightened by the euphony and heightened by the passage's streetwise style reminiscent of *skaz*, is yoked to the ethical imperative based on racial reconciliation.

Furthermore, "State" and "Coincidence" eschew simplicity inasmuch as the moments of relative plenitude staged at the end of both stories are constructed through the repetition of negativity, as in this dialogue between Sheilagh and Mal:

> She said, 'If you come back —don't do it if you don't mean it.'
> 'No way', he said. 'No way, no day. No shape, no form…' (60).

Stability is felt to be ephemeral or, to use the oxymoronic title of chapter 47 of *Dead Babies*, "A Bit Permanent" (Amis 1975: 164-166) because *eirene* is attained via agonistic negativity. This device is duplicated in "Coincidence" since reconciliation is sealed by Mrs Pharsin's negative interrogative clauses ("'… So you're not going to murder me? You're not going to slag me off?'") which are immediately met by Rodney's repetitive denials: 'What? Oh no. No no. No'" (111). "State" and "Coincidence" reach reconciliation and harmony through conflicts and negativity, which illustrates Ronald Shusterman's critical stance resting on "what should be a relatively obvious distinction between the *represented content* of a work of art and the *total experience* it provides" (Shusterman 2002: 81-82). Amis's apparent rhetorical negativity in fact mirrors the devices of sentimental literature which, through the frequent use of negative adjectives such as "ungenerous" or "unkind", "emphasize the goodness they negate" (Todd 1986: 5).

To round things off, both "State" and "Coincidence" are based on the conventions of sentimental comedy, as defined by Frank H. Ellis, insofar as Amis's short stories blend the satirical portrait of the declining Western world at the end of the millennium and eschatological issues pathetically emphasised by the representation of defenceless victims. The comical and eschatological veins underline the continuity of Amis's canon, even though and an evolution towards sentimentality becomes manifest. Finally, cosmic pessimism is superseded by a degree of harmony which further underscores the parentage between these texts and sentimental fiction. Aesthetically, Amis's predominantly agonistic style, reminiscent of sentimental literature's partiality for negative rhetoric, is dovetailed with a patent ethical imperative buttressed by the emotion undergone by the reader that prompts him / her to action.

These short stories thus prove that Martin Amis is no doom-laden prophet of gloom advocating nihilistic negativity via totally negative form and apocalyptic portents,[11] nor a novelist promoting good sentiments by blending irenic language and euphoric content. It is then the constant discrepancy between form and

content which federates these two short stories and obliges the reader to be perpetually on the alert insofar as he / she is alternately asked to laugh at agonistic dialogues, fear apocalyptic violence and wistfully smile at the spectacle of momentary and fragile serenity attained through negativity. Admittedly, the reader has always been solicited in Amis's texts as David Lodge has noted apropos of *Money*'s literary tricks and stylistic vividness: "After many pages of this sort of thing you might fall asleep from exhaustion, but not from boredom" (Lodge 1992: 60). Yet, the engagement between the reader and Amis's texts has changed. Indeed, one witnesses a qualitative evolution in Amis's fiction thanks to a kind of incremental repetition since, on top of the ever-present comic and apocalyptic veins of his earlier writings, Amis incorporates an unusually large amount of sentimentality in his most recent fiction, which eventually provides the unity of *Heavy Water and Other Stories*. And that is what is new in Amis's fiction.

Notes

[1]. This paper does not take into consideration Martin Amis's latest novel entitled *Yellow Dog*, which is due to come out at the end of 2003.

[2]. In a review dedicated to Amis *père* and *fils*, Geoffrey Wheatcroft asserts that Martin Amis is well-equipped as a comic writer since he possesses "an anarchic sense of the absurd, an eye for human folly, a pitch-perfect ear for speech" (Wheatcroft 2000: 115).

[3]. The adjective "sentimental" sounds surprising when applied to Martin Amis's fiction which is supposed to represent only negativity and encourage cynicism on the part of the reader, what Natasha Walter calls the "fixed leer" (Walter 1998: 81). Moreover, David Lodge in *Consciousness and the Novel* facetiously concludes his discussion on Philip Roth's apocalyptic fiction by asserting that "[e]ven Martin Amis admitted to being shocked" (Lodge 2002: 249).

[4]. By having an illiterate character repeat journalistic sports commentaries, Amis recycles a device exploited at length in *London Fields*, thus showing that Big Mal is a distant cousin of Keith Talent.

[5]. Walter completely misses out what is at stake in this passage which she misconstrues as emblematic of Mal's subnormal intellect. In her own terms, it shows that Mal is "breathtakingly inarticulate" (Walter 1998: 82).

[6]. Martin Amis resorts once again to the literary device lengthily exploited in *Success* via Terence and Gregory or in *London Fields* via Keith and Guy which consists in setting proletarian against aristocratic characters. This tendency has been noted by Amis himself in the "Letter to My Father" enclosed at the end of *Koba the Dread*: "you wrote, very largely, about the bourgeoisie in your fiction, i.e. the middle classes—a category seldom seen in mine, where I make do with the aristocracy, the intelligentsia, the lumpenproletariat, and the *urkas*" (Amis 2002: 272).

[7]. Thurmon Garner defines "the dozens game" as "an obscene folkloric speech event", based on "a pattern of interactive insult" which can be appraised as "a valve for aggression" (Garner 1983: 47).

[8]. Victoria N. Alexander has synthetised the stylistic and thematic influences of Amis's surrogate literary fathers, Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov, in her seminal essay entitled "Martin Amis: Between the Influences of Bellow and Nabokov", *The Antioch Review* (Fall 1994): 580-90.

[9]. The image of the rainbow prepares the reader of *Heavy Water and Other Stories* for the eighth short story, entitled "Straight Fiction", which deals with homosexuality.

[10]. Amis has univocally asserted his political opinions about sexism and racism in his non-fiction writings: "Sexism is like racism: we all feel such impulses. Our parents feel them more strongly than we feel them. Our children, we hope, will feel them less strongly than we feel them. People don't change or improve much, but they do evolve. It is very slow." Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* (London: Vintage, 2002) 9.

[11]. Without falling into the trap of the biographical fallacy, *Experience* is here illuminating, especially when one thinks of the controversial dialogue between Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie apropos of Beckett's style, noteworthy for its "maximum ugliness" which can be easily lampooned by using "lots of negatives" such as "'Nor it the nothing never is.' 'Neither nowhere the nothing is.' 'Non-nothing the never—.'" Martin Amis, *Experience* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000) 82.

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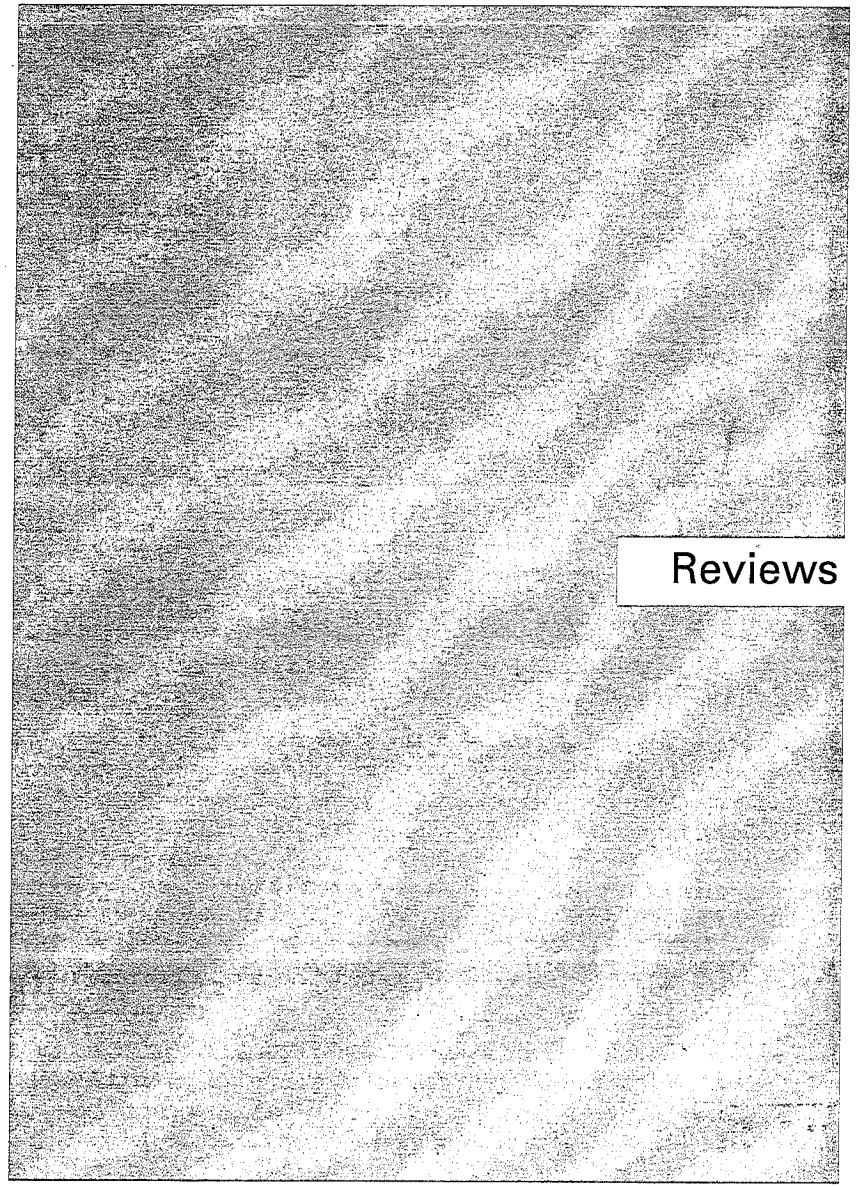

W. FLANNERY O'CONNOR: A LIFE

Jean Cash
Knoxville: The University of Knoxville Press, 2002.
(by Gretchen Dobrott Bernard. UNED)

When Sally Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor's close friend and official biographer died in 2000, scholars and admirers of O'Connor's work were abruptly denied the long-awaited and forever "imminent" publication of a full-fledged biography of this author. Fitzgerald had been researching her friend's life for years, and what is most important, had been on excellent terms with both Flannery's mother, Regina O'Connor, and O'Connor's family and heirs, who had proven to be solicitous when writing the biographical notes for the Library of America's 1989 publication of *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*. Thus, the disappointment increased as the months passed after Fitzgerald's death, and it seemed that no formal plans had been made to bring this eternal project to a satisfactory end. Fortunately, ten years ago, university professor and O'Connor scholar Jean Cash, perhaps suspecting that Fitzgerald's venture might never see the printing press, decided to take on the task herself. Her biography, *Flannery O'Connor: A Life* is the most thoroughly documented and valuable contribution to readers and researchers of this writer's work to date.

During its elaboration, Cash's biography was not free from obstacles. Towards what appeared to be the final phase of her project, she was forced by O'Connor's literary executors to paraphrase all direct extracts of unpublished material (Mankowaski 1). The rewording of letters and other essential sources inevitably causes her prose at times to seem awkward and ruins some of O'Connor's greatest quotes. However,

Cash cannot be blamed for not belonging to the Milledgeville, Georgia faction of accredited fans and scholars. In fact, no doubt aware of the difficulties she was bound to encounter, she should be commended for her tenacity and overall successful achievement.

O'Connor once wrote, "There won't be any biographies of me because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy" (in Johnson 1). Yet, at least five critics have dedicated substantial parts of their works to her life, and most O'Connor scholars pore over her hundreds of letters edited and published by Fitzgerald in 1979 in *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being*, which can be read, in a sense, as an epistolary autobiography. O'Connor's life, although short and relatively unexciting, as she herself states, if we compare it to those of her contemporaries Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty, was shaped by several significant events which make for very interesting biographical material and more importantly provide insight into the complexities and the uniqueness of her narrative.

Jean Cash has rightly focused on these events, affording them more thoroughness and page space than any other biographer has up to now. Her mastery of the subject does not go unnoticed as she relates and comments on the death of Flannery's father from systemic lupus erythematosus when she was just sixteen, the confirmation at age twenty-six that she would have to endure the same illness, her forced retirement to her mother's home town of Milledgeville, Georgia and her, at times, strained relationship with her mother, Regina, and finally, having to come to terms with the implications of an increasing physical diminishment and the acknowledgement of her encroaching death.

Thanks to Cash's research, scholars are provided with the possibility of interpreting episodes of O'Connor's life from a different perspective. And while we do not, and should not accept the veracity of all of Cash's manifestations, we can at least contrast her version of O'Connor's life with that of the "official" version dispensed by Fitzgerald. Confronting, and at times questioning, what has been accepted by many as the most accurate portrayal of O'Connor is, no doubt, a challenge, especially since Fitzgerald's biographical notes and commentaries happen to be included in what are probably the two most widely-read publications of O'Connor's work: *The Habit of Being* and *The Complete Works of Flannery O'Connor*. However, despite having to intrude upon Fitzgerald's territory, disturbing an apparent monopoly on her friend's life, Cash's efforts are ultimately worthwhile. By offering readers a different point of view, she encourages them to consider the notion that perhaps the perspective of a close friend is not always the most objective.

For, glancing at Cash's bibliography, several things stand out. First, the large number of entries, which confirm the solid documentation of this work. Then, on closer examination, one can count over forty interviews carried out by mail or telephone, or personally. It seems that a great part of the ten years of research invested by Cash has been spent speaking to or maintaining written correspondence with Flannery O'Connor's friends and acquaintances. Finally, her lack of contact with O'Connor's heirs appears to be confirmed by a complete absence of references to interviews or conversations with the author's family members. Thus, the nature of Cash's bibliographic references is entirely different from that of Fitzgerald's, and surely one of the most significant reasons for the importance of this biography resides precisely in the fact that many of the sources of these two women do not coincide.

Scholars will especially appreciate the enlightening accounts on two issues which have been discussed over the years by numerous critics and continue to be the grounds for controversy: her precipitated departure from the writers' colony "Yaddo", and her manifestations regarding racial issues and her own sexuality. Cash proves to be much more rigorous in her assessment of the former episode than Fitzgerald was, judging by the number and diversity of the sources she draws her conclusions from. In 1979 Fitzgerald tells us, in detail, how O'Connor was naïvely convinced by the poet Robert Lowell along with three other writers-in-residence to expose Agnes Smedley as a communist and, in turn, to accuse the colony directress of favouritism towards the author of *Daughter of Earth*. Fitzgerald claimed that O'Connor "fell behind this compelling Pied Piper [...] unable to withstand his blandishments" (1998: 415). Cash, on the other hand, does not absolve her of responsibility in this episode, despite her apparent passivity. In fact, interviews with two of O'Connor's friends confirm that she fully supported Lowell's role as "delegate for Yaddo guests" and the subsequent uprising against Smedley, an "active communist" (120). To document the account of this episode, Cash, apart from drawing from a number of sources, has carefully read and cited the minutes of several board meetings that were held to resolve the conflict.

However, when Cash has had to turn to sources which, belonging to the O'Connor estate, are subjected to certain restrictions, she runs into more difficulties. This is the case with O'Connor's personal correspondence, most of which is on file at the Ina Dillard Russell Library at Georgia College and State University, but cannot be quoted without permission from the family. Once again, and in all fairness, at the request of O'Connor's mother, Fitzgerald made an unfortunate editorial decision, at least for scholars, anyway, when she chose not to include letters which she thought might be "read out of context" and "would have been seriously misleading as to Flannery's deeper attitudes and convictions" (1998: 424). Thankfully, Cash labors through these letters, paraphrase after paraphrase,

because she knows that the value of their content will compensate for what at times is a tedious account of O'Connor's feelings towards African-Americans and the civil rights movements and her references to her own sexuality. Cash successfully transmits the ambiguous and often contradictory views of the writer on issues which are prevalent in her fiction, trusting the readers' ability to assess, or perhaps merely accept the idea that O'Connor may not have known herself how she felt about race and sex, primarily because her isolated life in rural Georgia and her illness did not provide her with enough experience to reach any definitive conclusions.

Consequently, Cash has managed to circumnavigate the lack of collaboration on the part of the writer's heirs satisfactorily. And what could be seen initially as an obstacle ultimately works in her favor, since she is not bound by the need to protect or anticipate harmful interpretations of the sources she refers to. Not being a native Georgian or part of Milledgeville academia, and being far removed from any type of rapport with the O'Connor family have afforded her an objectivity that Fitzgerald would likely never have achieved. Nevertheless, the worth of the latter's biographical notes should not be underestimated. On the contrary, only by contrasting both women's accounts will scholars be able to formulate their own opinions. Hopefully, sometime in the near future Sally Fitzgerald's work will be completed, along with other biographies which are in the making. Cash informs us of the existence of a set of letters written by Betty Hester to O'Connor, a close friend of the writer's, which will be available to the public in May 2007 (330). If these letters are at all like those written from O'Connor to Hester and published in *The Habit of Being*, they are certain to shed more light on the, up to now, one-sided conversations in which the women discuss topics such as the process of writing, their faith and their sources of inspiration. Until the impact of these letters is assessed, Cash's biography is a welcome contribution towards the study of Flannery O'Connor, the woman, and Flannery O'Connor, the writer.

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LA EXPERIENCIA PLATÓNICA EN LA INGLATERRA DECIMONÓNICA

Patricia Cruzalegui Sotelo
Oviedo: Septem ediciones, 2002 (trans. into Spanish by Pau Gilabert Barberà from the original Catalan version).
(by Pau Gilabert Barberà. University of Barcelona)

Septem Ediciones, the University Press in Asturias (**www.septemediciones.com**; info@septemediciones.com) has recently published the translation into Spanish of the doctoral thesis of Patricia Cruzalegui Sotelo (Lima 1955-Barcelona 1997), *L'experiència platònica en l'Anglaterra del dinou*, published in Barcelona by PPU in 1998. As the saying goes, every translation implies betrayal and, yet, as translator my intention has been to be scrupulously faithful, convinced as I am that this is the only means by which Dr Cruzalegui's study can give the reader exactly what she wanted: precise information as well as rigorous analysis; her views on other great researchers into the English 19th century and the presentation of her own personal ideas and hypotheses; in short, all that is required of a rigorously academic work, written both entertainingly and instructively, set in the past without ignoring the present and finally, if I am allowed a touch of Platonic daring, written "beautifully".

I believe I am not mistaken if I suggest that while Dr. Cruzalegui discusses a number of distinguished 19th century Englishmen such as J.S. Mill, W. Pater and, above all, George Grote, all of who were convinced that the best Plato —or the binomial Socrates-Plato— is that of the dialogues of search and inquiry, of doubt and of Protagoric relativism, Dr Cruzalegui herself construes a thesis where the final "criterion" is present —solidly constructed as a result of her excellent university formation, but where there are also numerous nuances, doubts and ideas

which formulate her own particular hypotheses. In short, she presents a piece of work, which is full of interesting suggestions, allowing the reader to free him/herself of the frequent torment of resignedly passive reading.

As translator, I naturally gave thought to whether I should translate the large number of texts that appear in English in this thesis. As a result, I decided not to translate them, not only because they were the intrinsic quotations of an academic study, but basically because they were the very link and tool, both skilful, ingenious and entertaining, of Dr Cruzalegui's analysis. Hence, the multiple references full of English quotations whose conciseness or semantic scope should not be adulterated. In this case, I have also been faithful to what Dr Patricia Cruzalegui always thought: the formation and preparation of the reader, contrary to what is often believed, should never be doubted. It is true that, when she analyses romantic Platonism the meaning of the terms are enriched with a poetic "extra" that puts us all to the test, but for this, we have meticulous explanations to guide us at all times.

Another of the outstanding characteristics of this study is Dr Cruzalegui's evident intention of not simply presenting us with prominent characters of the British 19th century intelligentsia in her "approximation to" and "assimilation of" the Platonic inheritance, but of reconstructing them in their social, political and cultural context —*lato sensu*— in a masterly way. Just as it is usual to evaluate the quality of a film by its setting and atmosphere, so Dr Cruzalegui also manages to project, stimulated by studious reading, the clear image of an extensive cultural period or a specific event, of both characters and their circumstances —as Ortega would say, of cultural movements and trends together with their causes and consequences, to the point of even describing the atmosphere of a literary evening from whence many a famous page of Victorian 19th century Platonism has derived.

To create an atmosphere is not, of course, an end in itself but merely a means. The real objective of Dr. Cruzalegui is to offer the reader the possibility of being present, through a leap in time, at brilliant and complex intellectual discussions among the great. If, thanks to her patient research, she announces that we are to attend a conversation between the British Greek historian *par excellence* G.Grote, and the most erudite and specialized of German critics, Zeller, for example, this is exactly what she means, we will attend the debate sitting in the first row, provided with all the necessary information, origins and background, without being deprived of her own and at times daring personal evaluation. Or we may personally experience, page after page, what might be called an interior dialogue of the great Victorian translator of Plato, Benjamin Jowett, bringing to light the self-corrections, revisions and all types of changes introduced in his three editions of the dialogues, without the distinguished don of Balliol College ever suspecting that

a persevering 20th century scholar like Dr. Cruzalegui would reveal serious contradictions that he had never discovered. This does not mean that we cannot perceive that beyond the inescapable obligations of academic criticism, the researcher can feel great fascination for his/her subject of study.

What are the contents of this thesis? It is surprising that Dr Cruzalegui did not tire of this self-imposed challenge of a "loving" analysis of a whole century of British Platonism. Others, without doubt, would have abandoned the project or simply would never have set themselves such a task or, at least, they would have drastically reduced the initial objectives. But the previous works of Dr Cruzalegui, especially her minor dissertation on "The Romantic Platonism of Shelley" supervised by Dr. José María Valverde, helped to forge what she already was, an untiring researcher, immune to discouragement, the very incarnation of a Platonic lover of knowledge.

Hence, we are presented with the results in this book that we are now reviewing:

a) Thanks to Dr Cruzalegui we are able to verify that a part of 19th century intelligentsia contributed to "romanticising" Plato, creating a Platonism stripped of rationalism and marked by enthusiasm and divine inspiration, as in Plato's *Phaedrus*. This created alarm in those who, in a positivist, empirical and utilitarian country such as England, thought that without the counterbalance of Aristotelian philosophy, the Platonists would become authentic visionaries. This is, in fact, the Platonism of Thomas Taylor, the first great translator of Plato who, with one foot still in the 18th century, reinvented Plato, according to Dr Cruzalegui, transforming him into a mystagogue or initiator of select minds and subtle sensitivities. The translator of Proclus and Ficino, himself known as "the English Ficino" and "the Modern Pletho" —alluding to the Byzantine philosopher— he created a neoplatonic Plato, who instead of investigating, pontificates, using obscure and complicated language apt for only a small circle of initiates. The romantic Platonism of Coleridge derived, to a large extent, from Thomas Taylor, whose philosophical Platonic thought was integrated into the world of poetic imagination. The romantic Platonism of Wordsworth too, while referring to a reminiscence of truths that the soul knew before incarnation, indicates a degree of intuitive Platonism: the Platonic *anamnesis*, which he absorbed indirectly thanks to his close relationship with Coleridge. Shelley's romantic Platonism also derives from Thomas Taylor, being a true paradigm of both poetry and reason achieving the ideal of Novalis, that is, the conception of philosophy as "a poem of intelligence" in a way that the Platonic image of the cave, for example, inspires or underlies many of his most famous poetic images.

b) Led by Dr Cruzalegui, we observe what I would describe as the "sophistization" of Plato which was presented by Grote in his *History of Greece*

and, above all, in *Plato and Other Companions of Sokrates*, that is, the sophists Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, Critias, etc. Grote's eulogies are restricted, in this case, to Socrates and Plato, investigators and seekers of the truth, untiring participants in dialogues, professionals of doubt and Protagoric relativism, supporters of *logos*, understood as an intellectual manifestation and of its contrary, *antilogia*, the necessary counterpoint to dogmatic temptation. Thanks to this thesis where the importance of Grote's studies is presented, paradoxically we come into contact with a more dogmatic and authoritarian Platonism, which abandons constant investigation as if it were intellectual paralysis, offering a model of an ideal state enthroning the Law. As we well know, the influence of Plato on Western culture has been enormous, so Dr. Cruzalegui guides us through the abundant criticism of Plato's thought up to K. Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, and even opens Pandora's box by considering the cultural influence of eugenics, as presented by the great Athenian philosopher, on the Nazi madness of the Second World War.

c) As a result of Dr Cruzalegui's long and frequent stays in Oxford, London etc, and her decisive plunge into the marshes of the *Jowett Papers* of Balliol College, the innumerable documents of the great Victorian translator of Plato, we are able to attend one of the most relevant and influential intellectual events of 19th century England: "the Victorianization" of Plato or the deliberate will to transform him into the referent and model of moral education without, according to Jowett, the excessive dogmatism of theology, and so shaping, with his help, the best ruling class of an Imperial England who believed they had been called to carry out the lofty mission of civilizing.

d) To Dr Cruzalegui's investigative subtlety we owe the clear understanding of the not so subtle or refined "sensual Platonism" of W. Pater, of his erotic aesthetics, that of *Plato and Platonism*, where he expounds his conviction that the senses, as well as the soul, have mysteries to reveal, which implies a turn in the assessment of Platonic philosophy, leading us away from the abstraction of the spirit to the deliberate and subtle voluptuosity of sensibility. The genius of Plato consisted in combining the spiritual dimension of philosophy with its other aesthetic and erotic dimension.

e) Thanks to this intelligent thesis we see with absolute clarity the enormous contradiction that those who lived in the masculine world of the colleges suffered from. Both students and teachers were to ignore the homoerotic exaltation of the Platonic dialogues that they read in the lecture room: *Symposium, Phaedrus*, etc in order to avoid *the unspeakable vice of the Greeks*, when it was more than evident that the most respectable pedagogical institutions in the country, from public schools to university colleges

promoted "homosociability" fostering many sincere cases of "homoeroticism" —real love and esteem among students or among students and teachers— bringing about inevitable cases of "homosexuality", which was what, paradoxically, was to be avoided. A complexity which the contemporary world has acknowledged thanks to, in most cases, film versions of novels. I refer to such well known films as Lindsay Anderson's *If*, Marek Kanievska's *Another Country*, James Ivory's *Maurice*, Charles Sturridge's *Brideshead Revisted*, even Richard Attenborough's *Shadowlands* and, of course, Gracia Querejeta's *El último viaje de Robert Rylands* (*The Last Journey of Robert Rylands*) among others.

f) Thanks to this thesis, we are able to verify that those who are most familiar with the misogynist nature of the Greek discourse on pederasty and naturally the Platonic dialogues which are so significant in this field, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, commit the same error that Plato himself committed in *The Republic*, where he established that women should receive the same education as men, although he really considered them inferior and incapable of reaching the same degree of intellectual excellence as men. Few women have been so praised as the celebrated, distinguished, venerable and chaste —despite motherhood— Victorian woman, who is purely and simply castrated of all sensuality, and considered inept for intellectual discussion and action, barred from being the real companion and friend of man. Let us not forget that V.Woolf had to prove her worth among her Bloomsbury companions and that Charlotte Barlett, the genuinely Victorian governess in E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* explains to her cousin Lucy Honeychurch that men venerate and honour women when they have prepared them a good dinner, although women, of course, would prefer a little less devotion and more authentic consideration.

g) Thanks to this book, we can understand the Platonic dissidence of the great Oxonian humanist John Addington Symonds, frustrated and hurt by the demands of the castrating purity of "classical Platonic love" which he discovers painfully to be responsible for the implacable "murder" of the human dimension of *eros*. His own experience of homosexuality, though late in life, allows him to finally treasure the long desired physical and spiritual experience of love, indivisible in its two-fold manifestation.

h) And finally we must thank Dr Cruzalegui for dealing with Oscar Wilde who was, in so many aspects, Platonic himself. We have the opportunity of putting aside the well known scandal to delve into the interiors of Wilde's personal examination of conscience in *De Profundis* and listen to the sincere lamentations of the notorious aesthete for not having carried out, as the Greek lover he felt he was, the pedagogical duties of being able to lead his beloved

Lord Alfred Douglas along the pathway of virtue. His was the love that finally dared to speak its name, despite the consequences, but Wilde had failed to carry out his most basic duties.

In short: in my opinion an excellent study in the field of "Classical Tradition" that, while concentrating on a specific subject and country, offers an approach and style which stimulate general interest.

STREETWALKING THE METROPOLIS. WOMEN, THE CITY AND MODERNITY

Deborah L. Parsons
Oxford and New York: Oxford U. P., 2000.
(by Teresa Gómez Reus. University of Alicante)

Deborah L. Parsons's analysis of the literary representations of women in the modern city is a welcome contribution to a line of enquiry that for the last fifteen years has sporadically explored the possibilities and implications of the *flâneuse*; that is, the female counterpart of the *flâneur*, a conceptual figure related to the characteristics of the modern artist, his modes of observation, and the public spaces he portrays. Parsons has taken up the gendered approach that art historians and cultural sociologists such as Griselda Pollock (1988) and Janet Wolff (1990) initiated in the wake of the 1980s to expose the masculine bias of the canonical versions of modernism, and to reveal the subtle techniques women artists used to assert their differing perspectives on the urban experience. Pollock's study of Impressionist artists concentrated on the socio-sexual division of the nineteenth century to argue that women painters such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat, restricted in their freedom of the city, either represented their alienation through interstitial spaces that imply tension between the inside and the outside, or offered unconventional angles of public places, like gardens and embankments, as sites of enclosure. Wolff's seminal "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity" also employed the concept of separate private/public spheres as evidence for the exclusion of women from the socially fluid world of the streets. Although she noted the presence of public women in Bauderlaire's city —the prostitute and the *passante*—, she regarded them as diametrically opposed to the

Lord Alfred Douglas along the pathway of virtue. His was the love that finally dared to speak its name, despite the consequences, but Wilde had failed to carry out his most basic duties.

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position of the *flâneur*, which, in keeping with the Benjamian definition of the term, she described as a figure of freedom, detachment and spectatorial authority. Her conclusion was that female *flânery* was impossible to posit: the *flâneuse* was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century.

During the 1990s the question of women's role as strollers and observers in the urban environment became an object of critical interest in other gender-conscious criticism. Cultural theorists described the mobility of bourgeois women to shop or to undertake social or charity work in certain districts of the nineteenth-century metropolis. And a few essays initiated explorations of literary images of urban women (Bowly 1985; Nord 1993; Ledger 1995; Ankum 1997), and of the relations between women, writing and streetwalking in modernism (Bowly 1992; Hidalgo 1993). These publications questioned the supposed universality of the trope of the *flâneur* and contributed to re-drawing the maps of literary urban modernism. Yet, the female *flâneur* continued to be practically absent from debates over the status of the image and the perceptions of modernity, and formulation of the city as a text to be inhabited, traversed and interpreted by men remained largely unchallenged.

The well-established assumption that the urban artist-observer is necessarily male explains why Deborah Parsons's *Streetwalking the Metropolis. Women, the City and Modernity* is such a welcome contribution. Timely and innovative, this book begins by assessing the cultural and literary history of the *flâneur*, and advances critical space for the discussion of the female *flâneuse*, focusing on a range of writers from the 1880s to World War II. Questioning Wolff's and Pollock's argument, namely that the gender divisions of the nineteenth century were strictly mirrored in the urban environment, she takes as a starting point the empirical fact of women's increased autonomous presence in the late nineteenth century, both in terms of leisure and employment, to challenge the view of aesthetic, urban perception as a specifically masculine phenomenon and privilege. The real originality of her thesis, however, lies in her reinterpretation of the *flâneur* as an elusive trope that contains "gender ambiguities that suggest the figure to be a site for the contestation of male authority rather than the epitome of it." (p. 6). Indeed, central to her argument is a reassessment of the concept of the urban spectator as ambiguously gendered. This androgyny undercuts the myth that the woman in the city is necessarily a labelled object of man's gaze and the notion, temporally universalised, that *flânery* implies an omniscient perspective and superior detachment. By presenting alternative modes of spatial awareness and involvement, less leisured and less assured, yet more consciously adventurous, Parsons validates a place for women.

A remarkable feature of this book is the scope of the ground it covers. Its focus is not exclusively concerned with the purely literary, but explores a range of cultural

factors that are pertinent to the theme, connecting feminist theory, urban and cultural sociology, and literary analysis with clarity and common sense. She examines *ambulatory* metaphors (the *flâneur*, the *passante*, the man of the crowd, the cosmopolitan), current research on turn of the century urban patterns, and feminist critiques of hegemonic modernism before centring her attention on post-Victorian and modernist female characters as participants/observers in the public spaces of the city. Brief but satisfying analysis of the representation of women in department stores and streets in the work of Gissing, Zola, Henry James and Proust preludes Parsons's discussion on women writers. Authors analysed include Amy Levy, Dorothy Richardson, H.D., Djuna Barnes, Jean Rhys, Janet Flanner, Anaïs Nin, Rosamond Lehman and Elizabeth Bowen; and the trajectories she covers explore the different spatial images they posited: from Richardson's emancipatory metaphors of "pilgrimage" to Rhys's, Bowen's and Lehman's sordid or disillusioned images of urban knowledge. As a postscript she turns to Doris Lessing's protagonist Martha Quest to observe the landscape and possibilities that have been left to a post-war generation.

A historical development is clearly suggested. Parsons examines how the urban-based novels of Rhys, Bowen and Lehmann, written in the late 1920s and 1930s, abandon Woolf's and Richardson's metaphorical flirtations with the streets, and depict disorienting and futile spatial movement, as they present the struggle of the woman not so much to enter but to survive in the consumer world of the city. Particularly sophisticated is her discussion of *flânery* in the war-torn city, when the traditional categories of space are radically disrupted, and the city frequently becomes the province of women. There are obvious tensions within the idea of *flânery* during wartime, and Parsons addresses them with acumen. She explores the trope of *flânery* as a metaphor for the increased freedom of women in urban life, but without neglecting the less positive aspects of enforced wartime nomadism.

In this perceptive research some relevant writers have been omitted. Kate Chopin's account of female *flânery* and consumerism in stories such as "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (1894) would have been relevant in Chapter 2; Edith Wharton's war reportage "The Look of Paris" (1915), an autobiographical narrative in which she clearly portrays herself as a *flâneuse*, would certainly have added texture to Parsons's discussion of women in the war-torn city, and there are other modernist writers, like Katherine Mansfield, whose peripatetic heroines could have been included (I am thinking of stories such as "Miss Brill" and "Je ne Parle pas Français"). On the other hand, genres such as travel writing could have been considered: As Efterpi Mitsi notes (2004), the trope of the "invisible *flâneuse*" equals that of the invisible woman traveller, while modern travelling, with its emphasis on the "transitory, the fugitive, the contingent", suggests the rhythms of the modern city and the potential to transgress spatial gender boundaries. But these are minor observations that do

not obscure the pleasures of this text. Indeed, after reading this study, with its plethora of detail, one looks forward to hearing more about this topic, so substantial to the history of women and the literature of modernity.

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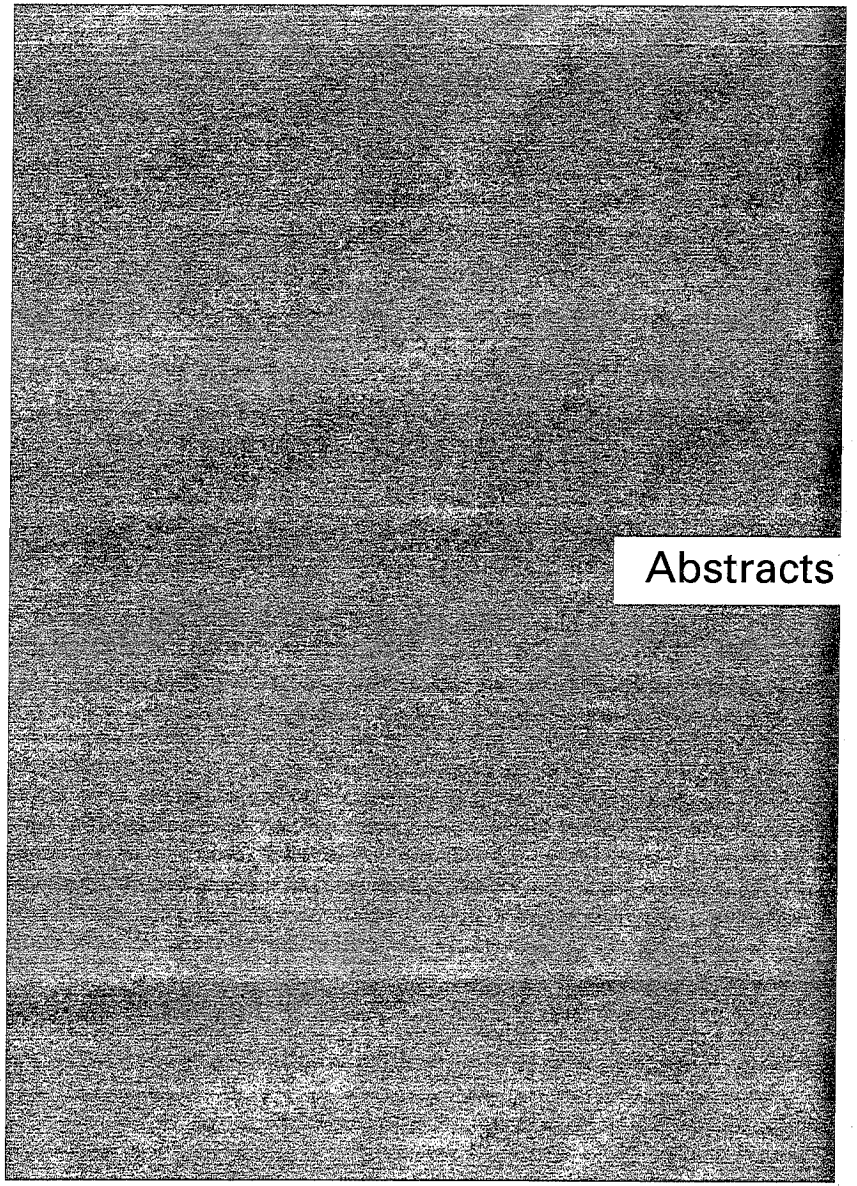


FORGERY, DIS/POSSESSION, VENTRILOQUISM IN THE WORKS OF A.S. BYATT AND PETER ACKROYD

Catherine Bernard

Most studies of ventriloquism and intertextuality in contemporary fiction have chosen to lay emphasis on the playfulness and metafictional quality of parody and, as often as not, have stressed its absence of ideological agenda. This article takes an opposite stance and highlights the hidden agenda of intertextuality, its inherent link with such questions as the death of the author, the exhaustion of literature and of culture, or postmodernist impersonality. Focusing more specifically on the works of A.S. Byatt and Peter Ackroyd, it shows how deeply ambiguous the logic of intertextuality may be. While literature seems irremediably condemned to experience creation as a form of aesthetic haunting, while it is caught up in an endless work of mourning and can only harp on its own depletion, it may alternatively be seen as retaining some paradoxical critical purchase on our contemporary condition. By exposing its own depletion, it also gestures to a possible ideological and poetic renewal. Fiction indeed recovers here some of its critical intent since it allows the reader to reflect on his/her own position in a culture of surfaces, echoes and mirror effects, but also explores the hidden logic of literary history.

Key words: English fiction, literary history, intertextuality, parody, forgery.

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS HATED ABOUT THATCHER'S BRITAIN: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MIKE LEIGH'S *HIGH HOPES* (1988)

Chantal Cornut-Gentille d'Arcy

This paper starts from a definition of culture that is set in the realm of cultural studies. Broadly speaking, cultural critics see Culture as both lived experience (i.e meaning making of individuals) and social construction. Hence the deduction that we cannot live social reality outside of the cultural forms through which we make sense of it. Along with and as a consequence of this assumption, no text, practice or event can be severed off from its contextual connections since, as Stuart Hall claims (1997: 25-46), the meaning of a cultural form is always the product of the text's "articulations", of the web of connotations and codes into which it is inserted. Such a view is essential to a productive understanding of Mike Leigh's *High Hopes* (1988) —a film which, at first sight, appears to be no more than a weird comedy about ordinary people doing ordinary things. For this reason, only a "radical contextualising" of both Thatcher's years in power and of the (visual) text itself will help apprehend Leigh's film as a real-life, political and ideological manifestation of what it felt to be alive at a particular time and place, i.e Britain in the eighties. My analysis of the film will show how the social tone and class tensions developed during the period are conveyed through the humorous portrayal of the actions, interactions and intimacy of three different couples.

Key words: Cultural studies, British contemporary film, genre, text/context, articulation, radical contextualism, ideology, Thatcherism, Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg.

THE ANXIETY OF BEING POSTCOLONIAL: IDEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

Chelva Kanaganayakam

This paper draws attention to the notion of "anxiety" as a significant aspect of contemporary postcolonial literature. Postcolonial authorship has become, in recent years, a far more contested area as writers locate themselves in ways that do not necessarily reflect majoritarian perspectives. The old binaries that characterized postcolonial studies are not always applicable in the present context. The marginality of authors is compounded by shifting cultural and political situations in nations that are configuring themselves in new ways. The resulting ambivalence has led to a new sub genre of postcolonial writing: a literature of anxiety. Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunesekera and J.M. Coetzee are among the major authors whose recent work demonstrates the preoccupations and formal strategies of this body of writing.

Key words: Anxiety, postcolonial, experiment, politics, decolonisation, ambivalence.

MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: REVERSING THE CODES OF DOMINANT CULTURE IN MADONNA'S VIDEOCLIP *DON'T TELL ME*

Elena Oliete Pascual

In 2001, Madonna startled the public with a new image, that of the mixture of techno music with country aesthetics in the video-clip *Don't Tell Me,* from her album *Music.* In many of her former clips, Madonna paid attention to marginal groups, bringing them to the centre. Basing my analysis on the theories of Laura Mulvey, Richard Dyer and Stuart Hall, among others, I will try to demonstrate that, in the music video *Don't Tell Me,* Madonna takes the mythical figure of the cowboy as a cultural manifestation of the dominant group and relegates it to the status of 'the other', while she proposes a world of freedom in which cultural hierarchies based on gender and race issues no longer exist.

Key words: Madonna, video-clip, identity, gender, American culture.

DYLAN THOMAS'S ANIMAL SYMBOLOGY IN CELTIC TRADITION: THE INNER VOICE OF A POET

Paula María Rodríguez Gómez

By means of a mythic journey into the collective unconscious, Dylan Thomas transforms his Welsh cultural values into a symbolic synthesis that explains the poet's presence in Cosmos as a link between nature and man. Native Welsh tradition is ever present in the outstanding number of animal symbols that Dylan Thomas enlivens his poetry with. His readers become thus initiated into the mysteries of his classical concerns about evolution and the nature of man. Animal symbols play an all important role in a system of opposites that Thomas weaves in his poems. This scheme becomes the core of poetic significance as an expression of mythological wisdom, and its symbols represent clues that disentangle the way into inner human truth within the chaos depicted by Thomas's own Modernist universe.

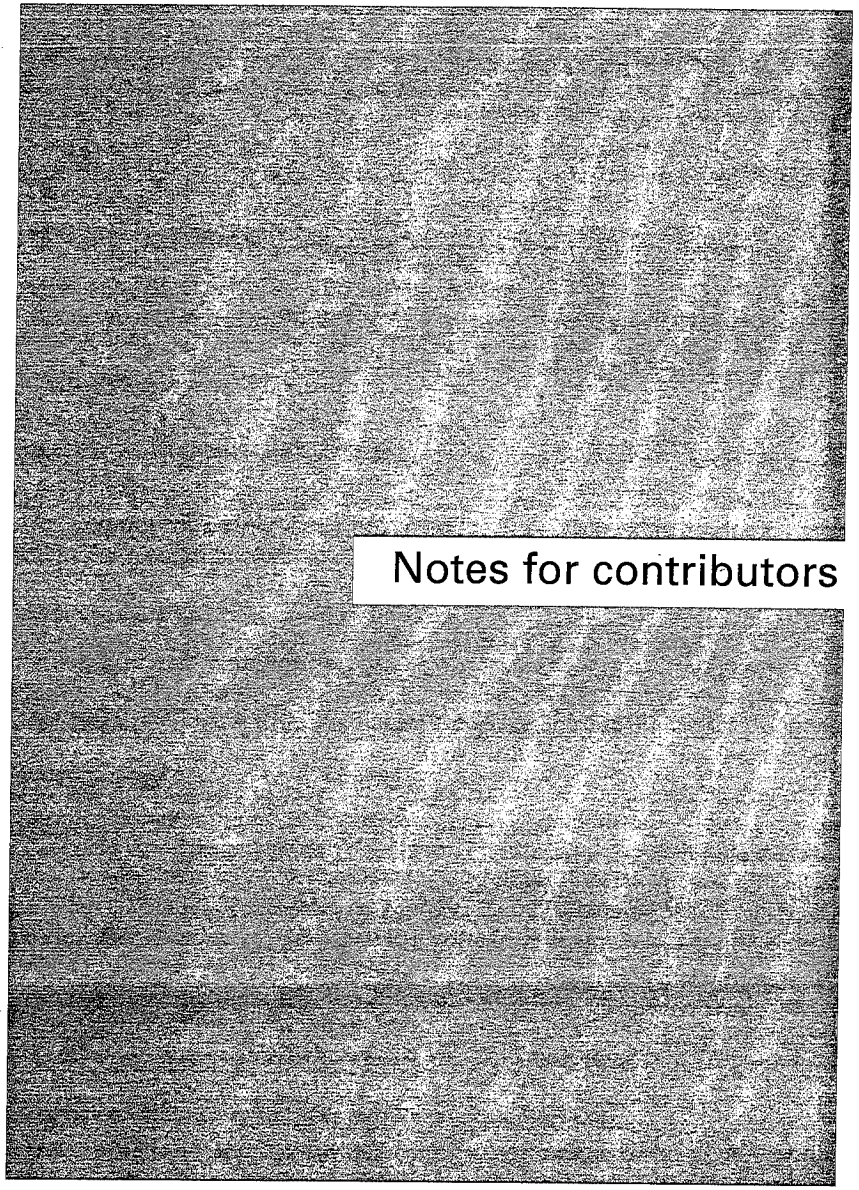
Key words: Archetype, animal, symbols, tradition, evolution.

SENTIMENTAL COMEDY IN MARTIN AMIS'S "STATE OF ENGLAND" AND "THE COINCIDENCE OF THE ARTS"

Luc Verrier

This article examines the analogies that "State of England" and "The Coincidence of the Arts" —two short stories extracted from Martin Amis's *Heavy Water and Other Stories* (1998)— bear to the conventions of sentimental comedy in order to shed light on Amis's aesthetic and ethical choices. Relying on tools such as "flyting", these stories comically rework the "pity for the poor" typical of sentimental works while borrowing from the genre of "condition of England" fiction. Yet, this comic veneer cannot conceal the apocalyptic instances of child abuse and domestic violence, *topoi* of sentimental works. Impending doom is nevertheless undermined by ironic patterns of reconciliation which tally with the cosmic optimism ultimately promoted by sentimental works. Since these *dénouements* are attained via rhetorical negativity, Amis's texts are also indebted to sentimental rhetoric, a heritage that betrays a resurgence of sentimentality in the work of an author wrongfully stereotyped as an effete prophet of doom.

Key words: Sentimental comedy, condition-of-England fiction, flyting, apocalyptic violence, agonistic reconciliation.



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