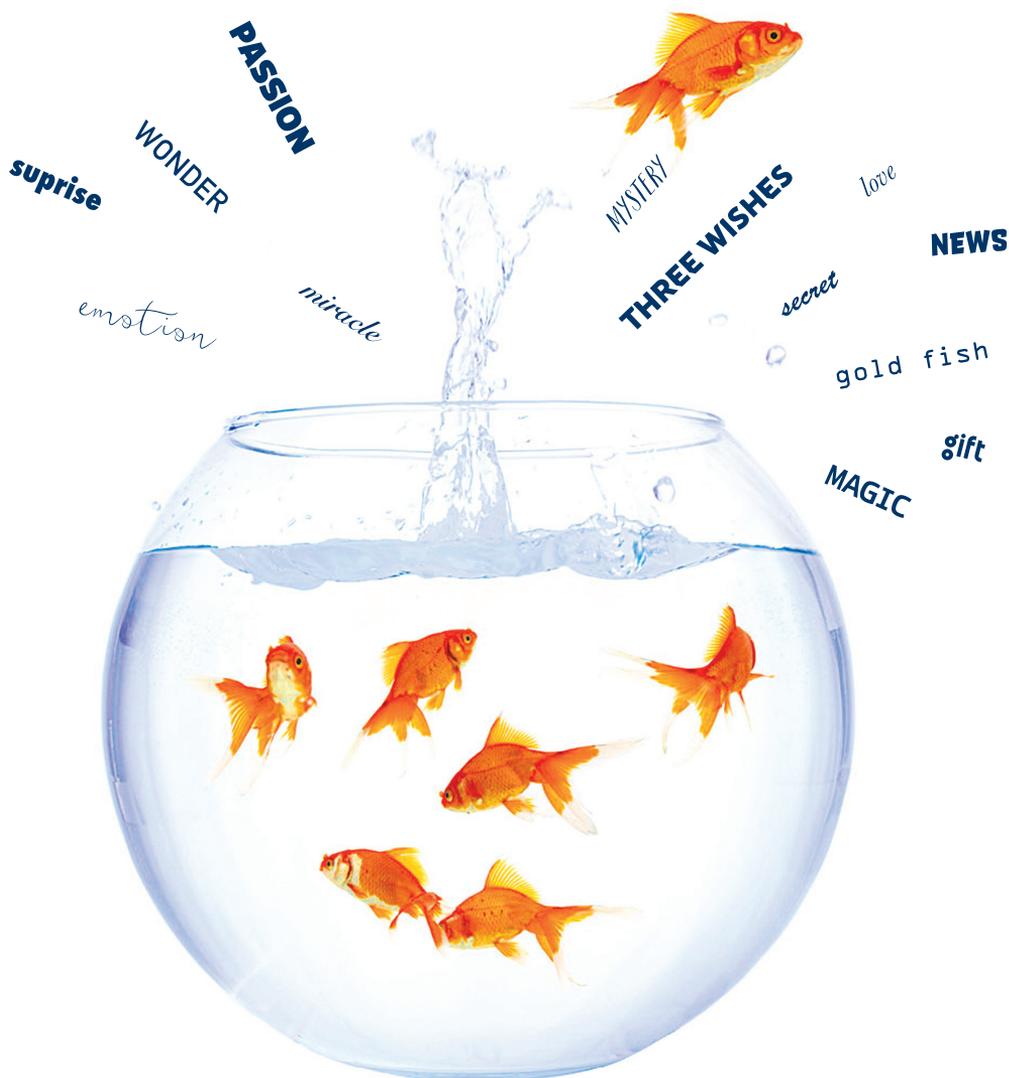


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# **Literature and Culture**



# “What will thou do, old man?” – Refashioning Lear’s Descent into Madness in Philip Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater*

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## Abstract

*Regarded by critics as one of Philip Roth’s comic and salacious masterpieces, Sabbath’s Theater incorporates a fascinatingly large amount of intertextual responses to William Shakespeare’s sublime tragedy King Lear. From Gloucester’s opening account of enjoying the creation of his bastard son in the opening of Act I to King Lear’s proclamation to “Let Copulation Thrive” in Act IV scene 6, Roth draws on Shakespeare’s tragedy to present his own modern version of extramarital love-affairs, betrayal, madness, suicide, and acknowledgments of mistakes and regrets. Both heroes are observed to be quite mad, yet many sympathized with their situation even though it was in both cases their own doing, for Lear’s and Sabbath’s madness are comprehensible due to their respective losses. This contribution will try to argue that Mickey Sabbath played the role of King Lear not merely off-Broadway in the 1950s, but later in his life in a modern version of the legendary King of Britain.*

*Keywords: Philip Roth, American Fiction, William Shakespeare, King Lear, intertextuality, madness, suicide, betrayal, scatology*

## 1. Introduction

*Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) by Philip Roth, a recognized masterpiece<sup>1</sup> written after Roth had returned to the United States following a lengthy stay in England, has already been approached critically as a work with Shakespearean characteristics: Peter Scheckner has rather convincingly proposed the figure of Falstaff as Mickey Sabbath’s model for its erotic, comic and anti-authoritarian aspects. Elaine Safer refers to both *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*

in reference to the graves and the cemetery episodes in this novel (60, 75). However, Sabbath's episodes of mental instability may also be linked with the titular character in *King Lear*, a tragedy Mickey Sabbath both directed and played in off-Broadway performances in his late twenties, with his first wife playing the role of Cordelia – a role which comes to repeatedly plague him in his mid-sixties as he slowly declines and deteriorates into madness like *King Lear* himself.<sup>2</sup> This contribution will emphasize a motivated rewriting by Roth of *King Lear*.

The beginning of the mental decline of the protagonist Morris (called “Mickey”) Sabbath begins in the novel's first chapter, when the 64-year old ex-theater director and former adjunct professor of performing arts loses the woman who has brought him greater joy and fulfillment to his love life than anyone else: the middle-aged Catholic Croat Drenka Balich, with whom he has enjoyed a 14-year extramarital affair until her death. Like the powerless *King Lear* who voluntarily gave up his property and wealth, the love-lost Mickey Sabbath becomes homeless and endures a heart-wrenching odyssey after Drenka's death, eventually bringing him to the very brink of madness. As with *King Lear*, the tragic dynamics become evident early in the novel.

Trained at a theatrical college in Rome in his twenties, Sabbath had been a professional puppeteer, while metaphorically speaking, *King Lear* became a sort of former puppeteer of his English subjects as the nominal King of England after his abdication of power. Like *Lear*, Sabbath selfishly manipulated the men and women around him much like puppets, and like *King Lear*, he eventually loses control. As Ranen Omer-Sherman puts it, “the tragedy of unraveling selfhood at the heart of *Sabbath's Theater* may suggest a far more traditional and bound Roth than was once assumed” (172). Obviously, the unraveling of selfhood is a central theme in *King Lear*. Both main characters share an intense preoccupation with political and material hopes, though with *Lear* power is directly linked to his status as king with property and soldiers, while for Mickey Sabbath, power is linked with sex. Until he gives away his land, wealth and accordingly all his power, *King Lear* thoroughly dominates over his subjects and necessarily falls into madness at his ensuing loss of respect and authority.

Mickey Sabbath dominates over other people somewhat like *King Lear*. When he loses control, as when his brother dies and his parents no longer behave coherently, or when his first wife Nikki disappears (murdered like Cordelia?) or when his mistress Drenka threatens to break up with him if he sleeps with anyone else but her, he cannot remain calm as her death by ovarian cancer is revealed to him first in word, then visually. Drenka likewise comprehends the meaning of her death. Aimee Pozorski shows that “Drenka here wails as *Lear* wails in his ‘final act of a classical tragedy’ stripped to nothing but pure emotion” (111).

Like *King Lear*, Mickey Sabbath rages exaggeratedly against anything he himself cannot control. Driving back home to Massachusetts after Lincoln Gelman's funeral in New York, he spots his wife Roseanne inside his house with a lesbian lover. Sabbath “had not known that he could open his mouth so wide, nor had he ever before realized [...] what a rich repertoire of frightening noises he was able to produce” (441), much like *Lear's* shouts of fury outside Gloucester's castle in Act II, Sc. iv when he learns that Cornwall and Regan have defied him. However, the nature of defiance in these two works is obviously distinct. As Peter Scheckner notes, Sabbath “is indifferent to money, power, acquisitions or

empire" (234) and instead feels injured by his loss of sexual partners. Earlier in the novel, Sabbath had defended rabbis performing religious marriage ceremonies for lesbian couples, but when he personally experiences the loss and betrayal of a similar manner by his own wife, he abruptly becomes much less tolerant. Steve Mentz writes of the "false-floor" effect in the second half of the drama in which all appears bleakest only to get even worse regarding loss, degradation and utter misery (17–18). This is evident in *Sabbath's Theater* as well: things can only worsen for Mickey Sabbath as the novel progresses.

## 2. "Let Copulation Thrive"

In *Sabbath's Theater* Roth confirms his frequent stance against marriage; between the majority of married partners, sexual impotence eventually becomes inescapable for Sabbath as with Gloucester, even when the protagonist is in his vigorous 20s: "As with millions upon millions of couples, in the beginning it was sexual excitement [...] after a while he could enjoy fucking her only when they'd smoked a joint, and then it needn't have been Nikki [Kantarakis] who was there" (130–131). In Sabbath's world, husbands and wives who no longer enjoy erotic stimulation seek elsewhere for it. Sabbath seduces women with the knowledge they have that they are bored with their husbands or partners:

"Adultery is a tough business," he whispered to her. "The main thing is to be clear about wanting it. The rest is incidental."

"Incidental," she sighed.

"God, I'm fond of adultery. Aren't you?" (335–336)

While Roth has been notorious for memorable sexual scenes ever since *Portnoy's Complaint*, the tragedy *King Lear* actually begins straight away with a salacious description by the Earl of Gloucester of his affair from which Edmund came into existence. When Kent asks of his son, Gloucester responds unabashedly:

His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge [...] Sir, this young fellow's mother could [conceive]; whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed [...] though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. (3–4)

Edgar, disguised as "Poor Tom," conveys to King Lear in the hovel that his own sexual misconduct relegated him to feigning the status of a homeless madman (rather than the adultery of his father, whose bastard son Edmund has ruined his prospects). In Act III, Sc. iv, the Bedlam beggar in fact describes something of Mickey Sabbath's life:

Lear: What hast thou been?

Edgar: A serving man, proud in heart and mind; [...] served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her; [...] One that slept in the contriving of lust, and waked to do it [...] and in woman out-paramoured the Turk (78).

While Lear benignly listens to the immoral behavior described by Poor Tom, he does not condemn him. Instead he still insists that Poor Tom must have experienced betrayal by his daughters just like him. Later in Act IV, Sc. vi, King Lear discusses adultery again:

I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?  
Adultery?  
Thou shalt not die: die for adultery! No:  
The wren goes to 't, and the small gilded fly  
Does lecher in my sight.  
Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son  
Was kinder to his father than my daughters  
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.  
To 't, luxury, pell-mell! (115)

King Lear will not acknowledge adultery as a crime anymore. Naturally, Lear's line "Let copulation thrive" cannot escape Sabbath's notice. At the funeral dinner, Sabbath plays footsie with Michelle Cowan and hallucinates that she desires him instead of her boring husband:

She was thinking, like Lear, "Let copulation thrive!" She was thinking (thought Sabbath) that in cahoots with this loathsome freak there might be a use to which she might put off her own propensities and her pendulating breasts, still a chance for the old juicy way of life to make one big, last thumping stand against the inescapable rectitude, not to mention the boredom, of death. (324)

Sabbath's salacious descriptions of his love-life with Drenka need not be quoted here, but suffice it to say that Sabbath viewed sex as the only escape from the boredom and stupidity of daily living. Roth decidedly outdoes Shakespeare in scatology. As Frank Kellener points out, "Philip Roth's heroes [...] detect nothing inauthentic about the religious pursuit of promiscuity [...] Sabbath is by far the most outrageously offensive member of this group" (166).

In reviewing his salacious relationship with Kathy Goolsbee, a coed at a small liberal arts college who recorded their sex-filled telephone conversations which accordingly got him dismissed from the performing arts department, Sabbath is reminded of Shakespeare's tragedy:

Life *is* impenetrable. For all Sabbath knew, he had just thrown over a girl who had neither betrayed nor bewitched nor bebitched him and never could – a simple, adventurous girl who loved her father and would never deceive any grown man; he had mistaken innocent, loving loyal Cordelia for her villainous sisters Goneril and Regan. He'd got it as backward as old Lear." (248)

With hindsight, both Lear and Sabbath express self-pity, and the old men's forlornness is barely recognized as their own fault. Lear's misunderstanding of Cordelia's love for him is compared by Sabbath rather unconvincingly with Sabbath's error concerning Kathy Goolsbee, and this comparison within the text is clearly misplaced by Roth.

### 3. "O, Let Me Not Be Mad, Not Mad, Sweet Heaven"

Madness is undoubtedly a major link between the play by Shakespeare and the novel by Roth. The causes of the madness are different, yet there are a few similarities. Philip Roth recreates much of Lear's bewildering disposition as Sabbath's mental state deteriorates:

He was drained of skepticism, cynicism, sarcasm, bitterness, mockery, self-mockery, and such lucidity, coherence, and objectivity as he possessed – had run out of everything [...] except desperation; of that he had a superabundance. He had called Norman Mort [his deceased older brother]. He was crying now the way anyone cries who has had it. There was passion in his crying – terror, great sadness, and defeat. (147)

Yet, while acknowledging his declining mental state, Sabbath maintains that his hatred is at least sane. After a rant about the prosperity of the Japanese as well as how he cannot stand reading newspapers or watching TV because Japanese are prominently featured in the media, Sabbath says, "I'm proud to say I still have all my marbles as far as racial hatred is concerned" (235). Linking the collapse of his family with the shooting down of his brother by the Japanese in World War II, Sabbath's hatred is unmistakably different from Lear's.

"Norman, I have to put up with so much in life. Professional failure. Physical deformity. Personal disgrace. My wife is a recovering alcoholic who goes to AA to learn how to forget to speak English. Never blessed with children [...]" (326)

Like the faithful Earl of Gloucester, Sabbath's theater producer Norman Cowen for a time continues to serve the instable man out of benign loyalty, with their respective children playing supportive roles during Sabbath's and Lear's mental decline. Both heroes appear quite mad yet are constantly sympathized with by a few loyal former associates, such as Kent for Lear. They recognize that Lear's and Sabbath's madness is comprehensible due to their respective tragic losses. Both Cordelia and Norman seek out medical assistance for the respective mental patients placed in their care. As Elaine Safer points out regarding Roth's language, which likewise obviously holds true for Shakespeare, "[the] lyricism encourages us to sympathize with Sabbath even though he is not a likeable character" (67). However, this view is not held universally. Stephen Greenblatt points out that "at least one great writer – Tolstoy – thought that an aged Lear who walks about raving wildly was an appropriate object not of awe but of moral revulsion and aesthetic contempt" (388).

In contrast to Lear's acquiescing nature when housed first in a mud-hovel and later a farmhouse adjoining Gloucester's castle, Philip Roth transposes this reaction and has Sabbath become irate while residing in Norman Cowan's luxurious Manhattan penthouse. As Omer-Sherman avers, Sabbath is in essence a "shtetl Jew," embodying so many of the characteristics except his complete lack of religious piety (175). Yet, the instable and mad people who usually make others feel uncomfortable (such as Donald living in the wonderfully-named Usher Sanatorium) do not faze Sabbath at all, but rather attract him, echoing how Poor Tom strongly attracts King Lear's interest.

At the sanatorium where Sabbath's wife Roseanne is an inpatient, Sabbath relates how religion, in particular the Old Testament of the ancient Hebrews, "embodies the world in all its horror" and emphasizes Biblically-sanctioned madness:

You've got to hand it to the Jews. Truly rare and admirable candor. What other people's national myth reveals their God's atrocious conduct *and* their own? Just read the Bible, it's all there, the backsliding, idolatrous, butchering Jews and the schizophrenia of these ancient gods? What is the archetypal Bible story? A story of betrayal. Of treachery. It's just one deception after another. And who is the greatest voice in the Bible? Isaiah. The mad desire to obliterate all! The mad desire to save all! The greatest voice in the Bible is the voice of somebody who has lost his mind! (278)

Remarkably, Steven Greenblatt notes that "*King Lear* [is] set in a pagan Britain roughly contemporary with the prophet Isaiah" (360).

When Sabbath visits his wife Roseanne, he encounters other patients at the sanatorium treated at the same institute. Described as "a man whose aversions I wholeheartedly endorse" by Sabbath, Donald describes the woes of contemporary society:

"The third great ideological failure of the twentieth century. The same stuff. Fascism. Communism. Feminism. All designed to turn one group of people against another group of people [...] The holder of the ideology is pure and good and clean and the other is wicked. But do you know who is wicked? Whoever imagines himself to be pure is wicked!" (274)

Unlike the mad Jew Donald in the same sanatorium attended by Sabbath's wife, Edgar associates pure wickedness with temptations of the flesh by the foul fiend and his subsequent sinful misbehavior. Sinning makes Tom so peculiar and, as Lear notes, he is "the thing itself; unaccommodated man" (74). Poor Tom suffers from extreme paranoia:

The foul fiend hath led [Poor Tom] through fire and through flame, through ford and whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire; that hath laid knives under his pillow and halters in his pen, set ratsbone by his porridge [...] Do Poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes. (77)

In their own opinion, Sabbath, Donald and Lear all lose their minds because of women. Not only Sabbath but also his mother and both of his wives had serious mental issues echoing scenes in *King Lear*. His first wife Nikki Kantarakis

couldn't bear the sight of ugly people or old people or disabled people. She was afraid of insects. She was afraid to be alone in the dark. If something made her nervous – a yellowjacket, a Parkinson's victim, a drooling child in a wheelchair – she'd pop a Miltown, and a Miltown made her a madwoman with a wide, vacant stare and trembling hands. She jumped and cried out whenever a car backfired or someone nearby slammed a door. (101)

Nikki seems to have had a pronounced nervous disorder which may have led her to commit suicide. Yet Sabbath was unfaithful to her and knows he may have to answer to his responsibility for her final exit, and this plays a role in Sabbath's despair.

#### 4. "In Cities, Mutinies; in Countries, Discord; in Palaces, Treason"

Jacobean England and the 20th-century United States are depicted by Shakespeare and Roth respectively as sites of social turmoil and political instability, irrespective of the passionate conflicts portrayed by major characters. Stephen Greenblatt states that *King Lear* "taps into a far more pervasive fear in this period" (359). For Roth, New York City is a "showcase for degradation, overflowing with the overflow of the slums, prisons, and mental hospitals of at least two hemispheres, tyrannized by criminals, maniacs, and bands of kids who'd overturn the world for a pair of sneakers" (189–90). Early in his drama, Shakespeare too paints a bleak picture of the formerly united kingdom, as the Earl of Gloucester tells his illegitimate son Edmund in Act I, Sc. ii regarding the dangerous instability they witness in society:

[...] love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the king falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves. (19)

In the callous society with continual intrigues and personal backbiting and treacheries by Edmund, Goneril, and Regan, as well as threats of civil war between Cornwall and Albany reflecting the Gunpowder Plot and Catholic insurrection at the time of Shakespeare's writing of *King Lear*, Lear's power was not evident except among a few loyal followers. In Sabbath's somewhat analogous setting, New York City is as loveless as a "city gone completely wrong" (189). The polite, bourgeois, Norman Cowan, residing in one of the most coveted locations in Manhattan, could not endure Sabbath's many sexual indiscretions with Cowan's wife, his pregnant Hispanic housekeeper, as well as Sabbath's appropriation of the personal belongings of Cowan's absent, college-bound daughter, Deborah. As the narrator states without hyperbole, "If it weren't war, lunacy, perversity, sickness, imbecility, suicide, and death, chances were he'd be in a lot better shape" (142).

The breakdown of social order which Shakespeare reveals in *King Lear* is caused by the struggle over ancestral land, wealth and political power. In *Sabbath's Theater* the breakdown of New York society is connected to a combination of increased poverty, false moralizing, and a widespread increase in crime. Sabbath's life of thirty years in exile with his second wife in Madasaska Falls, Massachusetts meant that "he had missed the transformation of New York into a place utterly antagonistic to sanity and civil life, a city that by the 1990s had brought to perfection the art of killing the soul [...] everyone from the helpless elderly to the littlest of schoolchildren infected with fear" (189). King Lear acknowledges his isolation from the multitudes living in poverty when he appears to discover homelessness for the first time in Act III. For Sabbath, as Peter Scheckner postulates,

[...] virtually all societal order brings mainly psychic and physical pain. *Sabbath's Theater* is both a rhapsodic and satiric statement to the effect that in what in our time stands between us and total imbecility, irrationality, chaos, and spiritual decay is the determination never to set limits on one's taste for more life. (288)

Both New York City and England have become God-forsaken places. The collapse of stability and safety within basic institutions is evident in both texts. Moreover, in *Sabbath's Theater* fathers commit suicide and daughters become institutionalized alcoholics. Feminism and totalitarianism are "all designed to turn one group of people against another group of people" (274). While *Sabbath's Theater* has been regarded as Roth's most sexually explicit novel (Kermode, n.p.), *King Lear*, while undoubtedly bawdy at certain moments, shows Shakespeare's most explicitly violent on-stage scene, namely the plucking out of Gloucester's eyes by the Duke of Cornwall in Act III, Sc. 7 – "Out, vile jelly" (93) – while there are no comparable graphic acts of violence in *Sabbath's Theater*.

### **5. "How Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth It Is to Have a Thankless Child!"**

King Lear and Mickey Sabbath both start their journey to madness after women within their own families throw them out of their homes. Lear's two elder daughters – Regan's order to knowingly lock the King's servant Kent in the stocks, and Goneril's questioning "What need five-and-twenty? Ten? Or five?" knights, to which Regan inquires "What need one [single servant]?" (64) – represent an affront to the King's body politic in Act II, Sc. iv, rendering Lear absolutely powerless and homeless. Roseanne kicks Sabbath out of his home in chapter 3, so this acrimonious conflict approximates the same point in the plot for both works. In addition to the titular characters becoming homeless, beloved women disappear because of the misconduct of both lead characters: Lear's youngest and most favored daughter Cordelia and Sabbath's first wife Nikoleta Kantarakis. Misconduct leaves Lear and Sabbath guilt-ridden, though they undertake great efforts to suppress guilt from being expressed publicly. Both Lear and Sabbath leave home and wander aimlessly after making terrible errors in judgment with close female relations, Sabbath's second (alcoholic) wife and Lear's two remaining daughters, Goneril and Regan. Mickey Sabbath contemplates suicide in a forest:

Homeless, wifeless, mistressless, penniless [...] jump in the cold river and drown. Climb up into the woods and go to sleep, and tomorrow morning, should you even awaken, keep climbing until you are lost. (109)

While Roseanne does not at first appear such an evil, vindictive woman as Lear's older daughters, she did falsely accuse her father, a highly regarded Harvard professor of geology, of sexually molesting her as a child after the father took Roseanne to Paris, living with a visiting professor of Romance languages. As a consequence of a divorce from his wife and alienation from his daughter due to these accusations, he committed suicide in his Massachusetts house, and it is strongly indicated that no such molestation had ever taken place:

You who abandoned your father have no position at all. For five years I lived entirely for you. Because of the expenses of your education and your clothes, etc., I was never able to be secure on a professor's salary [...] My anxiety [...] will not disappear even here, because of what your mother did to you and what you did to me (271–272).

Roseanne's father here is imagined to have written this letter from hell. The accusations he makes of the intense pain she has caused him appear modelled after Lear's repeated laments, as in Act I, Sc. iv: "how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" (34). While Lear perhaps feels a more intense sensation of abandonment since the ingratitude and hostility come from his two adult daughters, Roseanne's father commits suicide because of his daughter's mendacious behavior towards him. In both cases, the daughters have caused their fathers intense agony.

Later in New York City, Sabbath contemplates the meaning of his subway performance of *King Lear* for Roseanne, who regards him as a leech who never works:

he lumbered dutifully from car to car, shaking his cup and reciting from *King Lear* the role he hadn't had occasion to perform since he'd been assailed by his own tomatoes. A new career at sixty-four! Shakespeare in the subway, *Lear* for the masses – rich foundations love that stuff. Grants! Grants! Grants! At least let Roseanne see that he was out hustling, on his feet again [...] (209).

## 6. "Nor Rain, Wind, Thunder, Fire are My Daughters"

With an alluring personalization of nature to the tragic turn of events in the plots, both *King Lear* and *Sabbath's Theater* depict rejection accompanied by severe weather conditions. Lightning, thunder and a fierce rainstorm occur just when Norman Cowan casts Sabbath out of his luxury Manhattan condominium into the streets of New York City, replicating the storm pouring down in Act III, Sc. ii when the king is forced out of Gloucester's castle by Lear's sinister daughters. In the open, and inspired by this monstrous thunderstorm, King Lear yells his famous ebullition:

Blow, winds and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow!  
Your cataracts and hurricanoes, stout  
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.  
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts [...] (69–70)

Upon his forced departure from the Cowan household, a thunderstorm pouring down on the newly homeless Mickey Sabbath, the hero feels deeply isolated away from his home, utterly alienated and alone in New York City, to which he has returned after decades of exile in Massachusetts due to Nikki's disappearance. Sabbath only now realizes he has become homeless there: "Drizzle beading the big window and a mist whose milkiness obliterated everything above the treetops of the park: a rumble [...] thunder summoning up for Sabbath his years and years of exile" (349).

Sabbath begins the performance of a Lear-like odyssey in New York City: meeting and conversing with impoverished, homeless and dirty people. In both cases, these homeless poverty-stricken people exert a fresh influence on the newly abandoned protagonists' respective views of the world. For King Lear, who takes note of the poverty in his kingdom for the first time, he comprehends a sort of kindred spirit in the lowly, trapped in the storm without proper shelter, in Act III, Sc. iv:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowled raggedness defend you,  
From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! (76)

Lear's empathy continues to be shown to "Poor Tom" – who is in fact Edgar faking his crazed pandemonium in his mud hovel. James Shapiro shows how Shakespeare lifted the fake demonic tantrums recorded in Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), which defined and condemned exorcisms conducted by Catholic priests. Harsnett describes – according to Shapiro – "feigned possessions in theatrical language" (77) which appears in Edgar's disturbing demonic language of insanity. Just as Edgar feigns his mental inflictions, Sabbath feigns mental instability, even crying in front of Norman Cowan, and both characters act for the purposes of gaining empathy and thereby surviving in dangerous settings as homeless, dirty and badly attired people who had formerly occupied a significantly higher position in society.

In contrast to the beggar whom King Lear sees and conducts captivating discussions with, a visit among the homeless in New York City brings Sabbath before an African-American expressing anti-Semitic sentiments, so unlike Lear's encounter with "Poor Tom" where the homeless, hungry, and crazed fellow shows respect for the king, hostility takes place in an encounter between Sabbath and the joint-dealer:

"Smoke? Wanna Smoke?"  
"Not today, honey."  
"Man, I'm starvin'. I got great smokes. The real McCoy. I ain't had no breakfast, ain't had no lunch. Been out here two hours. Ain't sold shit."  
"Patience, patience. 'Nothing illegal is achieved without patience.' Benjamin Franklin."  
"Ain't had fuck to *eat*, man."  
"How much?"  
"Five."  
"Two."  
"Shit. This is the real McCoy."  
"But as you are the one starving, the leverage is mine."  
"Fuck you, old man, old Jew man."  
"Tut tut. That's beneath you. 'Neither a philo- nor an anti-Semite be; / And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man.'" (196)

In reciting the famous dictum by Polonius to his son Laertes in *Hamlet* in Act I, Sc. iii, as if he were giving moralizing advice to a friend, Sabbath challenges his interlocutor's underdog status while telling him at the same time to be nice to a member of another minority group. Nevertheless, the marijuana merchant inverts his underdog status and prophesizes a dire future for Jews:

"Someday ain't gonna be out here beggin' and sellin' shit. Gonna be Jews out here beggin'. Wait'll all the beggars is Jews. You gonna like that."

"All the Jews will be beggin' when there is a black Mount Rushmore, my dear, and not a day sooner – when there is a black Mount Rushmore with Michael Jackson, Jesse Jackson, Bo Jackson and Ray Charles carved upon its face." (196)

In contrast to the strife between these two men of misfortune, the homeless Edgar (disguised as "Poor Tom") feels ardent empathy for the hapless king and his new state of homelessness and humiliation in Act III, Sc. 6:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,  
We scarcely think our miseries our foes [...]  
How light and portable my pain seems now,  
When that which makes me bend makes the king bow [...] (88)

## 7. "O Indistinguished Space of Woman's Will!"

Lear cries out for Cordelia, finally acknowledging and articulating how badly he wronged her. Likewise, Sabbath weeps vociferously, crying out for his mother and the lost women of his life: "Rosa, Mama, Drenka, Nikki, Roseanne, Yvonne" (184). Sabbath shifts his way of addressing them collectively: "Ladies, if I have put my life to an improper use [...]" (185) and seems only somewhat out of his mind here. In Act II, Sc. iv, King Lear makes great efforts not to appear effete in public when he imprecates his elder daughters:

And let not women's weapons, water drops,  
Stain my man's cheeks. No, you unnatural hags!  
I will have such revenges on you both,... (65)

while Sabbath on the other hand openly cries, though at times he cries to gain sympathy rather than out of pure pathos, for example at Cowan's Manhattan condominium. In both *King Lear* and *Sabbath's Theater* the wholesome mother-figure is missing. Mickey senses his mother's presence as a ghost with whom he engages in conversations. Mickey Sabbath, as Elaine Safer puts it, "has so much need for the mother that he continually appeals to her ghost for help" (65). Motherhood is missing in *King Lear* altogether – the king's three daughters have no children and so no mothers appear at all among the many characters: Edgar has no protective mother and Edmund's mother is described as a whore, so it seems that Gloucester, like Lear, is a widower. Drenka, described as a whore, and Michelle Cowen, whose dirty pictures show her as disreputable, constitute the only living mothers in Roth's novel. Roseanne's deceased mother used her as a pawn for her divorce

settlement, resulting in Roseanne's father's suicide. Motherhood is explicitly desired by Roseanne, but Sabbath denies his wife children. Motherhood is even despised as a potential gift from the goddess of fertility, Venus, for Goneril in Act I, Sc. iv, as Lear appeals for divine revenge against his daughter for her cruel neglect:

Hear, Nature, hear; dear Goddess, hear:  
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend  
To make this creature fruitful.  
Into her womb convey sterility,  
Dry up in her the organs of increase,  
And from her derogate body never spring  
A babe to honor her [...] (34)

In another case regarding women, Nikki's fate, i.e. her unexplained disappearance, somewhat echoes the fate of Cordelia: Nikki disappears from Sabbath's life because of his awful mind control issues. On his way to Lincoln Gelman's funeral, while riding on a New York subway, Sabbath realizes that "he lost it" and as he recalls the words of King Lear, Nikki returns only in a hallucinatory form of a daughter Nikki and Sabbath had never had. This "daughter" in the New York subway looks so much like how his first wife Nikki used to look in 1960 that Sabbath feels compelled to recite lines from *King Lear* at the king's touching reunion with Cordelia, and the *mise-en-scène*, a tent, is a setting basically as transitional as the New York subway is for Sabbath: "Pray, do not mock me. / I am a very foolish fond old man, / Four score and upward, not an hour more or less, / And, to deal plainly, / I fear I am not in my perfect mind. / Methinks..." (296). Sabbath's mental confusion continues after the subway passes a stop near Astor Place, and he continues hallucinating in Shakespearean prose:

Methinks what? Methinking methoughts shouldn't be hard. The mind is the perpetual motion machine. You're not ever free of *everything*. The personal's an immensity, nuncle, a constellation of detritus that doth dwarf the Milky Way; it pilots thee as do the stars that blind Cupid's arrow o' wild geese that o'erwing the Drenka goose'd asshole as, atop thy cancerous Croatian, their course Canadian honk thou libid'nously mimics, inscribing 'pon her malignancy, with white ink, thy squandered chromosomal mark. (Emphasis in the original, 297)

Then instead of a daughter, Sabbath dreams Nikki back to life while on the subway, still reworking *King Lear*:

Nikki says, "Sir, do you know me?" Lear says, "You are a spirit, I know. Where did you die?" [...] Nikki: "O look upon me, sir / And hold your hand in benediction o'er me. / No, sir, you must not kneel." And Lear says it was Tuesday in December 1944, I came home from school and saw some cars, I saw my father's truck [...] (297)

Sabbath moves in his hallucination from the recitation of Shakespeare to his experience of receiving the news of his brother's plane crash and the family's ensuing hysteria: "[...] Morty's plane went down, but in friendly territory [...] and Lear replies, 'You do me wrong

to take me out of the grave,' but Sabbath is remembering the second telegram" (297) from the U.S. Military announcing the death of his brother. As an old man, Sabbath relives the horrors of losses that he cannot recover except through these hallucinatory forms which are expressed in the language of *King Lear*.

### 8. "The Foul Fiend Haunts"

Poor Tom screams that he is possessed by a wide variety of evil spirits such as Modo, Mahu and Flibbertigibbet. Tom is wildly strange, and yet in his madness there is something regarded as philosophical which attracts the king. These devils never appear in the play, so the audience merely senses that Tom's madness originates within him. Poor Tom communicates best with King Lear, much like Donald in the sanatorium only interacts successfully with Sabbath. Lear calls Tom a Theban, a philosopher, and wants to know from the man who has really been to the bottom as an "unaccommodated man" and "the thing itself" who is "a poor, bare, forked animal" (115). King Lear expects to hear about his own fate from Poor Tom, and hushes Kent and his Fool who prefer the king to heed their words instead. The haunting of Tom is focused particularly on his sins of the flesh.

In contrast, Sabbath's ghost does not emphasize sin at all. Sabbath's conversations with the ghost of his mother haunt him by constantly admonishing instead of consoling him: "First you make a farce of suicide, now again you make a farce of life" (162). Sabbath's love-hate relationship with this ghost – who behaves utterly differently than his own mother ever did – proves that the ghost is the archetypal, hypercritical Jewish mother-ghost, nagging Sabbath about his misdeeds, misbehavior and life-failures. In contrast, his mother had herself gone mad after Sabbath's elder brother's plane was shot down by the Japanese in World War II on December 13, 1944. At last sick of all the ghostly criticism, Sabbath denies his mother's ghost's existence: "Leave me be. Shut up. You don't exist. There are no ghosts." The ghost accordingly responds: "Wrong. There are only ghosts." (162).<sup>3</sup>

### 9. "Your Eldest Daughters Have Fordone Themselves"

Suicide or attempts at suicide constitute common features of both works. Goneril and Lincoln Gelman as well as Roseanne's father commit suicide, while Edgar, Gloucester and King Lear himself all express moments of such despair that they contemplate committing suicide. Nikki Kantarakis, Sabbath's first wife, might also have taken her own life. Besides the aforementioned mutual characteristics Mickey Sabbath shares with King Lear during his downward spiral, Sabbath likewise has suicidal thoughts. There is one feeble attempt by Gloucester, and possibly the king's fool committed suicide. Although Cordelia is clearly murdered by order of Edmund, it had been planned to appear as if Cordelia had committed suicide.

After murdering her sister, Goneril commits suicide after Edgar proves to her husband, the Duke of Albany, the existence of her sinister plans to have Albany killed by Edmund. This act of soricide followed by suicide is promptly relayed to King Lear (Act V, Sc. iii): "Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves" (144). The multiple murders and suicides among the nobility is replicated to some extent by Roth among family members, when Roseanne's false accusations of sexual molestation begets her father's alcoholism

and suicide. Later in the novel, in order to mock the nasty rumors which had surfaced in New York City, Mickey Sabbath talks to Norman Cowan about having killed his first wife Nikki. Sabbath then asks about how Norman plans to kill his wife or how he imagines his wife killing him (342–343).

After he is thrown out of Norman Cowan’s comfortable place in Manhattan into the street in a thunderstorm, Sabbath begins to consider ending his life:

[h]e headed toward the subway station. Though he hadn’t walked them for decades, he saw nothing at all of those streets, so busy was he in staying abreast of his wish to die [...] The-desire-not-to-be-alive-any-longer accompanied Sabbath right on down the [subway] station stairway [...]" (191)

After finding a seat on a subway train, Sabbath calculates the best procedure for suicide on his arthritic fingers using a nursery rhyme:

This little piggy slit his wrists, this little piggy used a dry-cleaning bag, this little piggy took sleeping pills, and this little piggy born by the ocean, ran all the way out in the waves and drowned. (191)

Too weak to kill himself, however, Sabbath hopes a policeman will shoot him and put him out of his misery, for as was stated earlier in the novel, without sex anyone might just as well be dead. The policeman, however, is the son of Sabbath’s mistress Drenka, and although Matthew loathes Sabbath, he does not shoot and kill Sabbath in spite of reading his mother’s diary revealing salacious details of their sex acts together. The policeman cries instead, and Sabbath “could not even fucking die” (451) unlike Lear. The clothes of Sabbath with the American flag draped over his back, his “God Bless America” yarmulka and his otherwise filthy and inadequate clothing, are analogous to the ridiculousness of the king wearing a crown of flowers in his hair in his state of utter madness.<sup>4</sup>

## 10. “The Excellent Foppery of the World”

Sabbath’s extremely critical attack on AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), and their peculiar method of bringing back “order” and understanding to the chaos of existence for the “devout” Roseanne, might be compared to the old heavenly supernatural superstitions and beliefs of the cosmos’ and stars’ influence on human behavior which Gloucester and so many others in *King Lear* believe in (critiqued just as harshly by Edmund). As Edmund puts it in Act 1, Sc. ii.

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that,  
when we are sick in fortune, – often the surfeit  
of our own behavior, – we make guilty of our  
disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as  
if we were villains by necessity; fools by  
heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and  
treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards,  
liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of

planetary influence; and all that we are evil in,  
by a divine thrusting on: an admirable evasion  
of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish  
disposition to the charge of a star! (20)

As in Edmund's soliloquy, the hatred of religion and its transcending powers permeates *Sabbath's Theater*. When Nikki's mother dies in Kensington, England, Nikki and Sabbath, each in their own ways, try to confront and endure the process of preparing a funeral: "Two days into her vigil we happened to see a priest walking by, down on South Audrey Street. 'Those are the real ghouls,' Nikki said. 'I hate them all. Priests rabbis, clergymen with their stupid fairy tale!'" (110). At the very end of the novel Sabbath screams, "I'm a ghou, I'm a ghou [...]" because he once again escapes punishment for causing so much misery and cannot believe he is still alive (451).

Sabbath rails against religion in no uncertain terms, though obviously to him it is not something to turn to for material gain, like Edmund does in *King Lear*: He instead simply reviews various instances in the belief systems of many religions as nonsensical, and asserts that to believe in any one of them is less an excuse for misbehavior than plainly an act of believing in the ludicrous:

*All the ancient religions were obscene. Do you know how the Egyptians imagined the origins of the universe? Any kid can read about it in his encyclopedia. God masturbated. And his sperm flew up and created the universe. (277)*

Sabbath reviews many of the ridiculous commands of God in various religions to prove his thesis that religion is wholly absurd. Yet some are not really religious in the ordinary sense. Sabbath's second wife followed the precepts of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which requires strict adherence to their rules, attitudes and behavior:

[H]e hated her AA slogans and the way of talking she had picked up from AA meetings [...] And those words she used! "And afterwards there was a discussion and we shared about that particular step." "I haven't shared that many times yet..." "Many people shared last night..." He didn't own a gun, even out on the lonely hill where they lived, because he didn't want a gun in a house with a wife who spoke daily of "sharing." (85)

Later Sabbath adds "He also didn't own a gun because of the word *comfortable*" (87). Like religion, Sabbath sees in Alcoholics Anonymous a reduction of people's basic critical thinking skills and vocabulary: "And is the only way to get off the booze to learn to talk like a second grader?" (88). Roseanne speaks the psychobabble fluently, as she claims that Sabbath lives following a pattern of domination over women. Sabbath responds, "A pattern is what is printed on a piece of cloth. We are not cloth" (91).

While Shakespeare presents believers and doubters of these pagan beliefs in pre-Christian society, Roth devotes the greatest expression on religion only to doubting cynics who argue convincingly of the absurdity of any sort of religious faith.

### 11. “Thou’lt Come No More, Never, Never, Never, Never, Never!”

At his capture by Edmund in Act 5, Sc. iii, King Lear plans a discussion of story-telling and reminiscences of past pleasures with his once again favored daughter Cordelia:

We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; who wins, who’s in, who’s out;  
And take upon’s the mystery of things,  
As if we were God’s spies: and we’ll wear out,  
In a prison wall, packs and sects of great ones,  
That ebb and flow by th’ moon. (131–132)

The same desire shown by King Lear to reminisce about the better days of the past with Cordelia in a calm setting is accomplished by Sabbath when he meets his father’s 100-year-old cousin, thought to be already long dead: “There was Cousin Fish. Not at the cemetery under a stone but sitting on a sofa by a side window” (380). Sabbath later comments, “I cannot commit suicide without saying good-bye to Fish” (381). He reminisces about the good old days when his cousin took him and his brother out fishing, taught them both how to swim out on the Jersey Shore and also sold vegetables out of his truck and delivered them to his parents’ house. However, Sabbath’s goal of sharing fond memories is not possible: suffering from severe memory loss, Cousin Fish nevertheless constituted Sabbath’s only living link to his childhood and to memories of his beloved older brother Morty, the WWII pilot now dead for fifty years. In their conversation, Cousin Fish speaks to Sabbath of his own life and death pessimistically:

“I think, when I think of dying, I think I wish I was never born. I wish I was never born. That’s right.”  
“Why?”  
“‘Cause death, death is a terrible thing. You know. Death, it’s no good. So I wish I was never born.” [...] *I want to die because I don’t have to, he doesn’t want to die because he does have to.* (396, emphasis in the original)

Cousin Fish, for all his memory loss, has reflected deeply about death: he has seen it up close, and he fears it. Cousin Fish has “the incapacity to die. Sitting it out instead.” This attitude intensely excites Sabbath: “*the perverse senselessness of just remaining, of not going*” (384) when he survives his wife and both his children.<sup>5</sup>

Like King Lear, Sabbath has moments of anxiety regarding whether he is a victim or a perpetrator. Sabbath considers his past behavior, contemplates if he is guilty of racism and sexism, as he considers a burial spot for himself next to a grave marked “Holocaust Survivor.”<sup>6</sup> He then considers the next grave stone, his own, carrying the words “Beloved Whoremonger, Seducer / Sodomist, Abuser of Women, / Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of

Youth, / Uxoricide, / Suicide / 1929–1994" (376). At this Jewish cemetery toward the end of Roth's novel, Mickey Sabbath talks to the dead and senile relatives, relating old childhood memories and old stories they had shared so many years earlier. He had read many books on death, and he seems riveted by death in all sorts of ways:

That's all he did now, read book after book about death, graves, burial, cremation, funerals, funerary architecture, funeral inscriptions, and attitudes toward death over the centuries, and how-to books dating back to Marcus Aurelius about the art of dying. (88)

Sabbath's first wife Nikki physically holds on to the dead corpse of her beloved mother, echoing Lear grasping the dead Cordelia. Both are obviously distraught, emotionally unable to accept their deaths, and in the case of Nikki, "fondling the corpse" (136) for three days. Ultimately Sabbath experiences the death of his brother as a pilot in WWII as a loss of his entire family, while Lear loses his entire family. Like Sabbath, Lear ends up with no children at the conclusion of his life.

## 12. Conclusion

Sabbath shares some features with King Lear and Roth clearly was influenced by Shakespeare's famous tragedy. Roth was recently divorced from his wife Claire Bloom, who had appeared as Cordelia at the Old Vic in London. Additionally, Claire Bloom performed a one-woman show called "These Are Women: a Portrait of Shakespeare's Heroines" which included Cordelia's famous lines. Her performances likely had some effect on Roth, who had lived in London with the famous English actress and had earlier written two novels set in England while she acted on stage and in films. Like Nikki, Claire was no longer a presence in Roth's life in the mid-1990s, and like Sabbath, Roth may have had reasons to feel guilty about their break-up.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of the protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater* definitely reveals much that is entirely unrelated to the plot or even the suffering evident in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The status of the king, his political loss of power after dividing his kingdom, and the treachery of his initially obsequious elder daughters, whose power grab first brings about Lear's most serious psychotic episodes – all of these elements are completely absent from Sabbath's experiences in Roth's novel. Likewise, the devious intrigues of Edmund against his father, brother and king are not echoed in *Sabbath's Theater* at all. Yet Roth's novel partially rewrites the tragedy: elements of betrayal, the complete loss of the meaning of non-erotic love, and the sense of emptiness often expressed in the language of Lear. I argue that after the death of Drenka, some of the human trials, torments and expressions of despair and madness in Shakespeare's tragedy strongly reverberate in the novel, and do so even in replicating Shakespeare's language. To a powerful extent, the selfishness exhibited by Lear, as well as many of the losses suffered by him, are made contemporary in the life of Mickey Sabbath.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Krupnick writes that “[*Sabbath’s Theater*] seems to me much the best novel Philip Roth has written and one of the best American novels altogether” in “A Shit-Filled Life: *Sabbath’s Theater*,” 13. Likewise, Harold Bloom wrote in 2003 that *Sabbath’s Theater* was Roth’s “masterpiece” in his book *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds*. New York: Warner Books, 207.

<sup>2</sup> Sabbath also directed *The Cherry Orchard* and other classical plays of the Western canon off Broadway. (Roth’s ex-wife Claire Bloom had performed in a famous production of *The Cherry Orchard* as Madame Ranevsky.)

<sup>3</sup> The messages emitted by the ghost of Sabbath’s mother may be compared with the regular admonishments of Lear’s fool, who takes the king to task for his foolish errors.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on Sabbath’s clothing and attire, see Safer 66.

<sup>5</sup> Cousin Fish echoes the pessimistic ending to *King Lear*: “All’s cheerless, dark and deadly” (Act V, Sc. iii), and his Schopenhauerian view of life as not worth the trouble.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on Sabbath as a perpetrator of pain and hurt of others, see Brett Ashley Kaplan, “The American Berserk in *Sabbath’s Theater*.”

<sup>7</sup> For more biographical background on Roth before the writing of *Sabbath’s Theater* began, see Bloom, *Leaving a Doll’s House. A Memoir*.

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# Love in the Years of War: the Representation of Love and War in Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

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## Abstract

*Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939) and Djuna Barnes's Nightwood (1936) explore doomed love within the context or against a background of war. Both texts are vibrant critiques of war and therefore militant in their pacifism. Whether explicit or implicit, these modernist writers' refusal to endorse war counters traditional war narratives; harboring an unfulfilled love, the narratives assert a female viewpoint pitted against a male one, whether rejecting traditional gender roles or blurring gender boundaries. This paper examines the interconnection of love and war within the complex dynamics of history, memory and trauma woven within the narratives as Porter and Barnes engage in gender politics.*

*Keywords: Katherine Anne Porter, Djuna Barnes, war, love, history, gender, trauma*

War fiction written by women became a category of its own during the twentieth century. Katherine Anne Porter's acclaimed novella, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939), and Djuna Barnes's now classic novel, *Nightwood* (1936), could easily be read as belonging to this genre. "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and *Nightwood* explore doomed love within the context or against a background of war. While Porter's narrative ends with the Armistice (1918), Barnes's, wedged between the two world wars and looking back to the First, announces the Second in fear and trembling. Although categories can only be restrictive and classifying these texts as war fiction may sound reductive, reading them together through the prism

of war and love can deepen our understanding not only of “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” and *Nightwood*, but also the experience of war that the two writers weave into their narratives.

These modernists, Barnes a late and a Sapphic modernist to boot (Miller, Benstock), both expatriates in various periods in their lives and with little formal education, pore over the world conflict that shook and enriched their artistic vision and come up with a penetrating depiction of war, thus writing women into war narratives, an area traditionally reserved for men. Likewise, they counter those narratives by protesting and denouncing war in their fiction – there are no heroes and no victory, only distress, defeat, destruction and death in these texts. While in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” Porter clearly assumes a pacifist stance, thus turning her novella into a peace manifesto, in *Nightwood* Barnes exposes the atrocities of war as part and parcel of the human condition.

These two texts represent women writers’ responses to war and suffering. Though Porter and Barnes did not have a particular liking for each other, the former dissociating herself from “the whole gang” (Porter, “Interview” 21), i.e. the expatriate modernists in Europe, ironically their papers lie together in the literary archives of the University of Maryland. Such a symbiosis can be reinforced by their similar approach to the social institution of war, as they both set out to subvert traditional role models and gender stereotypes by denouncing the patriarchal ideology that underpins this institution. However, while gender dichotomies are questioned and evaporate in their texts, demonstrating how gender functions as a system of power, Barnes’s stance is resolutely more radical, as she also raises the issue of sexual orientation, fundamental in her examination of war and love. Likewise, while both texts question language as an appropriate vehicle to convey the emotional distress of war and love, Barnes displays the same radicalism in her use of language that defies interpretation. But where the narratives mostly seem to diverge is in their approach to history – Porter’s vision remains rooted in history, while Barnes seems to assume an ahistorical stance.

In the effervescent climate of the first part of the 20th century, when women’s writing entered a new phase of self-awareness,<sup>1</sup> one way for women to enter the social arena was to question the gendered institution of war and the predominant representations of gender difference associated with it. Porter and Barnes, both coming from unconventional families, vehemently attacked the institution in their narratives. Though they both condemned WWI, Barnes’s dismissal of the war also hammers home the idea that woman is no less of a warrior than man, while Porter’s total opposition to violence is embodied in a female character, Miranda Gay. The novella, somewhat based on autobiographical facts (Givner 127), features a brief romance in 1918 Denver, steeped in the Great War atmosphere and the raging Spanish influenza pandemic, between a young soldier, Adam, and Miranda, a newspaper journalist. Adam nurses Miranda, smitten by the epidemic, and returns to duty. The journalist recovers to find that the war has ended and that her lover, who had also been infected, has died at the front.

The conjunction of love and war in the novella underlines their oppositional nature. Love is doomed because of the war, which is all the more ominous for the civilians because of the 1918 influenza pandemic that makes death a daily experience. Indeed, the war and the influenza combine to fuel the war hysteria, prominent in this third person narrative: “They say [...] that it is really caused by germs brought by a German ship to Boston [...] Somebody reported seeing a strange, thick, greasy-looking cloud float up out of Boston

Harbor” (315).<sup>2</sup> The pathos that surrounds the romance stems from the deprivation of the future for the young characters, as the narrative voice makes clear: “[Adam is] not for her or for any woman, [...] committed without any knowledge or act of his own to death” (314). The focaliser, Miranda, prematurely mourns the absurd death of her lover. Love in the novella is a *carpe diem* attempt, a temporary haven of peace, configured by the sheer will of the female character. The latter appears immersed in “the radiance which played and darted about the simple and lovely miracle of being two persons named Adam and Miranda, twenty-four years old each, alive and on the earth at the same moment” (310).

However, she is also immersed in the war, this “plague” (331) that contaminates everyone – even the center of resistance, herself, who self-avowedly “help[s] win the war” (311) yet nearly dies of the influenza. War is synonymous with violence, death and insanity, as the uniform is likened to a “straitjacket” (310); it can by no means be atoned for by the all-pervasive propaganda best expressed in the rhetoric of the Liberty Bonds peddler, which Miranda denounces: “Coal, oil, iron, gold, international finance, why don’t you tell us about them, you little liar?” (325). Thus the myth of the just war, “the WAR to end war, war for Democracy, for humanity” (325), which infuses the rampant patriotism in the text, is shattered as private lives are shattered. If Adam is the sacrificial victim, Miranda is no less so, for women were also integrated into the war effort, as the focaliser Miranda voices: “it [life] matters even less if you’re staying at home knitting socks” (311). Male and female destinies merge and bow down to an institution that serves the interests of the few, namely Wall Street bankers and big industrialists; this was a commonly voiced Socialist belief during those years.

In fact, the novella is a gender-conscious text. As Gary Ciuba observes, “Miranda is attracted by the cultural model that validated one gender by subordinating another, yet she increasingly questions the models that she makes her own” (56). However, Ciuba’s statement needs to be qualified. Miranda is clearly not attracted by this cultural model, but records and dismisses it, notably the “easy masculine morals” (311) that consecrate women’s subordination and the masculinity models associated with them. Assaultive misogynist masculinity is one model of “military masculinity” (to use the concept Cynthia Enloe employed in the 80s) in the text, and it is illustrated by one of Miranda’s colleagues, Chuck, who represents “the rejected man.” Miranda seems to read his thoughts: “War was the one thing they wanted, now they couldn’t have it. [...] All of them had a sidelong eye for the women they talked with about it, a guarded resentment which said, ‘Don’t pin a white feather on me, you bloodthirsty female. I’ve offered my meat to the crows and they won’t have it’” (321). Though Adam is not unreceptive to Miranda’s critical discourse about the war, he has also interiorized the militarized masculinity model that transforms him into a soldier: “If I didn’t go, [...] I couldn’t look myself in the face” (326).

The masculinity model not only involves moral integrity and a sense of honor, but even an accessories code, as Adam’s embarrassment with his wristwatch indicates: “boys from southern and south-western towns [...] had always believed that only sissies wore wrist watches” (309). According to Carol Cohn, “it is extremely difficult for anyone, female or *male*, to express concerns or ideas marked as ‘feminine’ and still maintain his or her legitimacy” (238). Adam must conform to the masculinity model imposed on men, since war appears as a way to evade the threat posed to male identity in those years.

Porter's opposition to the war hysteria during the Great War, which her biographer Janis P. Stout confirms (27), and her dismissal of patriotism as a structural power relation enriching the patriarchy, lead her to make bold narrative choices that overturn gender expectations – it is the man who is transformed into a nurse as Adam nurses the sick Miranda and then returns to the front to die an unheroic death. Likewise, another reversal in the narrative is to be found in the definition of courage, which lies in Miranda's denouncement of war: "Suppose I were not a coward, but said what I really thought? Suppose I said to hell with this filthy war?" (303). If there was some ambivalence in Porter's approach to gender, as Stout maintains,<sup>3</sup> this novella does away with it in its depiction of a poised, autonomous, self-willed woman whose romantic aspirations are not at odds with her independence.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that though Porter claimed "to have been a pacifist all her adult life [...] there were times during WWII when she fell away from her pacifist principles," according to Stout (27), notably signing a patriotic piece called "Act of Faith" (Stout 154). Albeit problematic, and though "feminist thinking has historically pitched against war and other forms of violence" (Sylvester 7), her act points to a female diversity of approaches to war, which is more and more the case today.

In *Nightwood*, Barnes confirms the current female position that women are not necessarily bearers of peace, as Cohn makes clear in her article "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War." Indeed, Barnes's denunciation of war is conveyed in much more dramatic images. Like Porter's novella, Barnes's novel also draws on autobiographical inspiration, recounting the most passionate love Barnes experienced for the artist Thelma T. Wood, "the longest and most damaging" in her life (Benstock 236). This plotless novel, mostly set in Paris, brings together a host of marginalized characters. The narrative focuses on Nora Flood's desperate love for Robin Vote, the obscure object of desire of the half-Christian, half-Jewish Felix Volkbein, who is unhappily married to her and is abandoned by her, and of Jenny Petherbridge. The latter provokes Nora's separation from Robin. This set of bewildered characters turns to the transvestite Matthew O'Connor for some understanding of their plight. O'Connor, an unlicensed doctor and war veteran, responds to their despair and sense of loss by relating it to his own experiences of war.

Contrary to Porter's representation, love and war are not antithetical in Barnes's novel but collusive – love in *Nightwood* is indeed a battlefield. In an autobiographical text titled "War in Paris," Barnes wrote directly about her experience of war. Before her return to the U.S. in 1939, the author was in Paris undergoing a breakdown, and thus she describes a firsthand experience of the war: "So, though none of us caught in Paris had seen one dead body, or heard many guns, or suffered any personal attack, neither imprisonment nor loss of men, still the fear was there, and the nerves giving away" (Barnes, *Collected Poems* 268). Ironically *Nightwood* had already expanded on this experience picturing the Great War and its impact on private lives, notably on O'Connor's, whose indelible war memories constitute an anti-war cry.

Though the direct references to war in *Nightwood* are not numerous and may appear incidental, they are tightly woven into the narrative which complements the war-like atmosphere with military metaphors and diction. O'Connor is the sibyllic storyteller in this third-person narrative, interspersed with his long monologues; he is also the war-teller whose war memory is mobilized by the ongoing battle of love. To each character's anguished query about love the doctor responds in an apparently incoherent way with an animal story

that points to the absurdity, the abjection and grotesqueness of war. O'Connor's haunting recollections aim at exorcising the double terror of war and love; he is the one endowed with a survivor's memory. As Klaus Theweleit puts it, "The survivor's memory, speaking from the pole of anesthesia, has stored the tested invulnerability (blood proof) of its owner" (308). It is precisely this sort of invulnerability that educes O'Connor's gruesome war stories.

In the very first chapter, "Bow Down," the Doctor demonstrates why he can argue "about sorrow and confusion too easily," as Nora accuses (39). He does so through his first animal story, which features a terrified cow during a bombardment. The animal acts as a mirror image of O'Connor, whose observation of the cow saves his mind from maddening fear, as expressed in a witty understatement: "Thanks be to my Maker I had her head on, and the poor beast trembling on her four legs so I knew at once that the tragedy of the beast can be two legs more awful than a man's" (40).

Indeed, animal imagery along with metonymy make it easier for Barnes to write about the war, which is all the more difficult as "to describe the material effects of war means to possess an anatomical knowledge and vocabulary from which women traditionally were excluded," as Margaret Higonnet points out (207). In fact, Barnes faced a double difficulty, as she was also writing a sexuality that was rarely represented in literature.

Thus after the tableau of a panicking cow where the fecal motif predominated, Barnes turns to horses and creates the tableau of "the horse who knew too much" (162) to penetrate Robin's mysterious character, the least voluble figure in the novel. To Felix's disconsolate question why Robin married him, O'Connor answers with another war image of an afflicted horse: "She was in mourning for something taken away from her in a bombardment in the war – by the way she stood, that something lay between her hooves – she stirred no branch, though her hide was a river of sorrow" (163). This insight into Robin – who thus appears steeped in uncontained grief and unresolved mourning, just like the other characters – points to O'Connor's interpretation of Robin's inability to take on not only matrimony and maternity but also a fulfilling love affair. Robin's comparison with a horse, profoundly affected by a bombardment, is a point in the text that could justify Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick's consideration of Robin as a shell-shocked civilian whose trauma is inarticulate (28). However, since O'Connor's understanding of life and love seems to be mediated by his war experience and his discourse is characterized by war-related tropes, Robin's "undefinable disorder" (169), in Felix's view, may also appear to defy etiology in the text.

Indeed, Robin remains impenetrable and unconquerable until the end of the narrative. If love has some paradisaical qualities in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and can be understood through the ancient Greek concept of *Philia*, Empedocles' ruling principle of attraction and combination, it is a permanent hell in *Nightwood*; it points to *Neikos*, strife, the force of repulsion and separation. Specifically, O'Connor's wartime memory of a decapitated horse – recounted to the disconsolate Nora – evokes the ghastly nature of memory known to those who have experienced loss. Robin only temporarily becomes the war trophy of Jenny, who fights for her by all possible means and wins the battle with Nora and her other rivals, but who finally also loses the war, since the young woman returns to her wandering life in search of Nora. Thus all warriors, even Jenny, a most unlikeable character, share the same destiny, as pointed out by O'Connor's rhetorical question: "Who knows what knives

hash her apart?” (180). His war memories, along with his constant deployment of war imagery, underline the desperate human condition – death is no longer an abstraction or a sanitized notion, but is immediate and gut-wrenching.

Moreover, Barnes’s central character, Nora, condemns militarism when she enters the conversation between Felix, who praises Vienna’s military superiority, and O’Connor, who responds ambiguously (34). The author also dismisses militarism in her parody of a female character, Hedwig Volbein, “a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty” (11), significantly the only straight female character in the novel. Thus positing Hedwig, a masculinized woman, an “androphiliac” (Ruddick 113), and O’Connor, an effeminate man who, deep in gender trouble, enlists to fight in the war, Barnes undermines the opposition between masculine and feminine. O’Connor’s war memories not only shape Barnes’s dark vision of love, but also serve her exploration of sexual identity. Margaret Bockting rightly observes that “One way to subvert [...] the predominant representations of gender difference was through the figure or concept of androgyny [...] employed by [...] Barnes” (Bockting 21).

While some of her female characters are only figuratively warriors in the love-equals-battle trope in O’Connor’s discourse, the Doctor, who assumes a Tiresias-like part in the narrative, experiences it both as a man and as a woman in the combat zone; he jointly condemns it, interpreting his father’s attitude in an interesting manner: “he hoped I could conduct myself like a soldier. For a moment he seemed to realize my terrible predicament: to be shot for men’s meat, but to go down like a girl, crying in the night for her mother” (110). O’Connor’s father, representative of the common belief of the times that violence and aggression reinforce masculinity, had viewed the war as a remedy for his son’s homosexuality. Like Porter, Barnes dismantles heroism, but does so through shifting sexual identities. Fulfilling this duty reserved for men turns out to be a mutilating, undignified, traumatic experience.

Gender in Barnes’s work also strongly intersects with other power structures such as class and race, and these social arrangements shape the experience of war in the narrative. Felix’s fascination with militarism and Christian aristocracy seems to stem from his desperate need to gain access to history denied to those of his race. His friendship with O’Connor, Felix’s antipode, stems from the affinities woven by their subordinate masculinities – racialized or feminized. Barnes’s marginal characters – Jews, Blacks, homosexuals and lesbians (also disqualified from war) – are no less war-wired, albeit paradoxically so. It is clear that Barnes does not condone war; yet her narrative – heavy with the premonition of WWII (Marcus) and intent to exterminate those she brings to life in her novel – has no use either for romantic love or for peace.

Not that Porter has any use for peace at the end of her novella, where the narrator’s loud irony cleaves the silence she means the reader to hear: “No more war, no more plague, only the *dazed silence* that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything” (350, my emphasis) There is no ambiguity as to the war’s irreparable damage – the war affected the capacity for mourning, essential for the creation of a future. Death got the better of everyone. The instrumentalized discourse of propaganda, preeminent in the narrative, corrupted language irreparably and transformed thinking beings into speechless ones (323). The “prefabricated language of big, empty exhortations” (Stout 31) is certainly

not the only type of discourse in the narrative. Nevertheless, the transcendent view of language and death, intimated by Albrecht Durer's print which is subtly incorporated into the narrative (Davis), and reflected by the Negro spiritual of the title sung by the two lovers, does not prevail – Miranda is unable to do the work of mourning. The discourse of love culminating in Miranda's pathetic apostrophe of Adam (350) also falls silent against the larger context of a numbed world. As Ciuba rightly observes, "The world of 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider' has lost such an awareness of transcendence" (57).

Indeed, there is no uncertainty about this loss in Porter's novella. Its chiseled and limpid, controlled and compressed language, with the elaborate juxtaposition of different discourses in the narrative, tapers off into unambiguous silence. By contrast, Barnes's novel, whose complex tropes (such as "carachresis") take the uninformed reader by surprise, offers the most ambiguous ending.<sup>4</sup> In her brief last chapter, "The Possessed," Barnes brings a hiatus into the linguistic continuity of her narrative. In this chapter, which brings together Nora and Robin again in the former's chapel, the author withdraws the heavy artillery of her tropes, thus leading her prose to a rhetorical standstill. Rhetorical silence and the silence of the characters are only cleft by Robin's and the dog's barks and cries. The two women collapse, thus remaining tantalizingly proximate yet apart and unable to communicate.

In "The Possessed," which is under O'Connor's oracular prediction of an end that has in store "*nothing, but wrath and weeping!*" (233, italics in the original), impossible love, in all its unhappy splendor, and the war-wired future of mankind, in all unspeakable monstrosity, merge. In this suspended moment of near-reunion, Barnes attempts to intimate the sublime.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Porter's ending, Barnes's ending appears open-ended, though only to presage more misery and death in the offing. The formal cohesion of Porter's subtly symbolic, poised and precise language allows for a closure that naturally points to the chilling silence of death. On the contrary, Barnes's arcane, parodic and satiric language, at the intersection of modernism and postmodernism, abandons cohesion to intimate the inarticulateness of existence, as the last sounds the reader hears in *Nightwood* are Robin's and the dog's cries and whimpers. While "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" remains fixed in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, *Nightwood* portrays a world on the verge of disintegration, which corresponds remarkably well to the social and political era in which it was written, i.e. the 1930s, as Andrew Field suggests in his biography of the author (Field).

Moreover, her depiction of this world is characterized by decadent aesthetics, with an emphasis on homosexuality, the sterility of lesbianism, corporeal decay, mortality, death and above all suffering as a universal condition. Indeed, Erin Carlston, who investigated the novel's ideological affiliations with Nazism, points out that "The philosophy of the decadents, and Barnes, denies the origins of suffering in material conditions, ascribing it instead to that which is entirely beyond the power of historical, political, or scientific progress to rectify" (Carlston 56). Likewise, *Nightwood's* sensibility to Catholicism (Eliot, Carlston) suggests the acknowledgment of the profound reality of human suffering and mortality. In addition, as all the psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel have shown, the narrative is imbued with yearning for the lost maternal (and grand-maternal) object, and the return to the undifferentiated, unmediated space of the womb (Sherbert, Smith). For the orphaned, inveterate melancholics of *Nightwood* who live in and through the night, "the trauma of life" overrides all other traumas.

Unlike Barnes, Porter's vision of life is shaped by her leftist political ideas, which – in spite of her disaffection from the politics of the left in the late thirties – inspired her political activism that strove to improve social conditions. Her high modernist immaculate depiction of a transcendence-deprived world in the aftermath of WWI highlights her aversion for the institution and demonstrates the author's pacifist stance, whereas Barnes's disfigured language gropes for what Tyrus Miller calls a "mystical mode": "O'Connor, in his hermeneutic function; holds out a glimmer of hope in the mystical interpretation of the events, a reading in which the passion of suffering, written on the surface of the body of the sufferer, points to a deep hidden truth. This mystical mode [...] is the last refuge of modernism's gesture of symbolic 'rescue' in *Nightwood*" (158).

This said, Barnes's exposure of an alienating society and her critique of the war are no less sharp and far-reaching, nor is her depiction of the specter of the Great War in the text less acute. Thus the denunciation of war paradoxically remains a genuine value amid an all-pervasive pessimism and a dark vision of life that leaves no room for hope. Barnes's anti-romantic, hopeless vision of love in *Nightwood* found a good match in a life-devastating institution that proved the irrationality and destructiveness of humankind. If Porter opted for a mismatch between love and war, Barnes equally engaged with the gendered politics of war and thus undermined "the insidious and deadly division, based on sexual orientation... among women of the expatriate community" (Benstock 244). Porter's and Barnes's responses to war cast history in a larger perspective which includes a female outlook, and though they both questioned the term feminism, their literary voices did have a say in the writing of a conflict that turned human beings into expendable items.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter's typology of the construction of female tradition in her article "Towards a Feminist Poetics," though problematic and controversial, could be useful. Her distinction between feminine (until 1880), feminist (1880-1920) and female (from 1920 onwards), tracing the establishment of female roles in society, somewhat clarifies the terms.

<sup>2</sup> All citations from the novella refer to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*.

<sup>3</sup> "She had to prove to herself again and again that she could also fulfil the myth of romantic womanhood, a myth she could never reconcile with her conception of herself as an artist and superior achiever. The result was a lifelong conflict" (Stout 176).

<sup>4</sup> For the use of carachresis, "a trope that stayed beyond the field of contextual determinations warranting its usage" (Singer 72), in *Nightwood* cf. Alan Singer.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the sublime in *Nightwood* cf. Aristi Trendel.

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# A Romance with Words: Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* as a "Coming-of-Voice" Novel

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## Abstract

*Although shorter than its predecessors, Mothering Sunday (2016), Graham Swift's latest novel to date, in a sense represents a noteworthy synthesis of its author's works of fiction. Using a close third-person narrative perspective, it confirms Swift's departure from first-person narrators which began in Wish You Were Here (2011). However, in terms of some of his idiosyncratic themes and narrative strategies, it more strongly follows his earlier novels, The Light of Day (2003) in particular. This article discusses Mothering Sunday's position within the body of Swift's novels and shows that by making the heroine a successful writer he more forcefully than ever before explores the theme of writing fiction. It also argues that the novel contains a significant degree of self-reflexivity, as Swift projects into the story of its central protagonist his crucial ideas and beliefs concerning creative writing and its ethics.*

*Keywords: Graham Swift, Mothering Sunday, language, voice, silence, storytelling, immediacy*

Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* (2016), despite its rather moderate volume, is a remarkably complex and articulate text in that it synthesises the major concerns of the author's fiction as well as adding to them a degree of metafictional self-reflexivity by addressing the theme of writing. The protagonists of Swift's first nine novels tend to be preoccupied, if not obsessed, with their past, particularly some darker events of their familial history whose roots can be traced a long way into the past. The looming despair and hopelessness of their personal and/or professional situation provoke in them the need to discover and understand what shaped and affected their life prior to their crisis, which forces them to go

deeper into the past and gradually reveal long-forgotten and repressed memories and experiences. These are always frustrating, distressing or even traumatic, as they involve such occurrences as murder, suicide, abortion, insanity and fatal illness. However, the more the protagonists lay their past bare, the more confused and insecure they seem to be, as they feel that they are losing the very foundations on which they have built their identity and existence, including the mechanisms they have so far successfully employed to fend off their traumatising recollections.

As a result, they find themselves facing a dilemma of whether to follow the easier path and flee these memories, or whether to make them meaningful by verbalising them into a story, and, by doing so, attempt to make sense of their repercussions. As the first path proves to be a dead end, the protagonists, overwhelmed by the “insidious hold exerted over the present by a traumatic past” (Craps, *Trauma* 2), eventually tend to opt for the latter course. Through this they can come to terms with the past and thus hope for some form of redemption: “While denial is shown to have catastrophic consequences, Swift’s work also raises the possibility that the process of working through trauma might create the conditions for a viable alternative *modus vivendi* based on openness to and respect for otherness” (Craps, “Interview” 638). A crucial part of this process is the ability of the afflicted individual to transform the unspoken and cryptic past events into a coherent narrative. This is why these protagonists are mostly first-person narrators whose “dominant narrative mode” is that of “mourning and/or melancholia” (Bényei 40), yet whose memory proves these emotions to be pathological, as they originate in unresolved and suppressed issues.

Their narration is instigated by two contradictory motivations. On the one hand, they need to talk over the troublesome past, take it out of the unconscious domain and prevent its uncontrolled, obtrusive recurrence in nightmares or hallucinations. On the other hand, they also wish to justify and comfort themselves, to downplay or relativise their wrongdoing or failure, which can only be “achieved if the narrator is his or her own judge and confessor, hence the enterprise requires a degree of deception and self-deception” (Kučala 127). The process of disclosing their guilt is a lengthy one, as the protagonists are prone to evading the painful truth, and they repeatedly digress from it by telling a variety of other tales. Such narration has a disrupted chronology, as “[t]here is always a movement backward and forward between the narrator’s present and past events recounted” (Malcolm 16), and it is constructed “anachronically by means of numerous external subjective analepses” (Kempf 186). The effect is a “delayed confessional narrative” (Russell 116) that with greater frequency and intensity recurs to the crucial *moment* and makes it clearer. Thus, in the end, the protagonists recollect the missing bits of their story and, to their dismay and almost in spite of themselves, plead guilty by articulating it in its entirety.

It is the actual articulation of the protagonist’s story that lies at the centre of Swift’s attention. The beginning of his career in the early 1980s coincides with the narrative (re) turn following the crisis of storytelling after WWII. This entailed “the emergence of a sensibility characterized by a new kind of awareness of the ways in which human existence is saturated with cultural narratives, and by an acknowledgement of both the need for narratives and their ultimate lack of foundation” (Meretoja 2). One of the key themes of Swift’s novels is therefore the importance of storytelling, which for him represents a wonderful, democratic, humane communion whose magic is unsurpassable (Goring). Indeed, all his works show the need to express and share our experience, memories, and feelings

in the form of a narrative, which is one of the defining aspects of the human condition, thus presenting human beings as “the story-telling animal” (*Waterland* 62). This theme then inherently subsumes a number of related sub-themes which only add and attest to its complexity. Prominent among them is the significance of assuming one’s voice and finding a language which would feel natural for the teller and, at the same time, be rich and diverse enough to enable him/her to articulate what he/she wishes to communicate. Other aspects explored are the convoluted and changeable relationship between words and things, language and the world, and fiction and reality. Swift’s tenth novel, *Mothering Sunday*, offers his most thorough and elaborate exploration of the above themes, which is why it also moderates or even relinquishes some of the characteristic preoccupations of his previous works. This article shows that although *Mothering Sunday* bears similarities to some of Swift’s other novels, especially *Wish You Were Here* (2011) and *The Light of Day* (2003), its distinct thematic focus and stylistic rendering make it one of the most notable achievements of his career so far.

### **Silenced Voices and Voiced Silences**

The quest for language inevitably takes place in relation to its absence, be it a temporal loss of voice, a long-term denial of the opportunity to express oneself, a reluctance or disinclination to speak out, or an inborn inability to give voice to one’s ideas, experience and feelings. Swift’s novels brim over with different forms of silence – wordlessness, reticence, verbal inadequacy – and the intricacy of their protagonists’ situations is shaped by their ambivalent desire to simultaneously break and preserve these silences which they find both stifling and reassuring. Another idiosyncratic feature of Swift’s stories is the particular combination of voices and silences. Typically, silence surrounds some unpleasant and painful past event in the life of a character and they are, at least unconsciously, aware that putting it back into words may prove disruptive to their current fragile state of mind. For a time, preserving the silence seems a more comfortable (and therefore better) option. Yet as the weight of the unuttered gradually grows and besets their day-to-day existence, the status quo becomes unsustainable, and they try “to wrest meaning from gaps and spaces where communication has broken down” and “force the silence to speak” (Winsworth 55), be it out of curiosity or despair.

Hovering between telling and remaining silent, the protagonists look for someone to share their stories with, which is why they come up with the notion of an implied audience, a kind of “a third party eavesdropping on private words, or acting from behind the scenes to elicit them, or to collect them”. This “idea of an audience [...] at the back of their minds” (Tatarian 53) then operates as a decisive driving force that prompts the protagonists to transform their memories and experiences into a narrative, an essential initial step in the process of bringing the truth to light. However, their attempts to get to the core of the event in question are rather tentative and lacking in confidence and determination, and touch on it at first only diffidently and fleetingly. Therefore, the silence that originally occupied a single space erodes, crumbles and “finds its way in the narrative in the gaps produced by the fragmentation and temporal dislocation of the story, as well as in the rhythm of a narration which makes us hear its breaks and pauses as much as the flow of its sentences” (Tollance 63). The narration is then repeatedly interrupted by silences and reticence that

in some way substitute for the yet unspoken parts of the revelation, as they help the reader deduce the truth from what the protagonists take pains to remain silent about.

These silences are scattered among the protagonists' strenuous wrestlings with words, and, perhaps paradoxically, they amplify rather than attenuate the effect of these words. They allow the words to stand out and resonate powerfully in the space enclosed by the silences, which are there "to bring out rather than to hush the disturbing power that each may possess – to unveil rather than to shield" (Tollance 64). And so, while outwardly silent, the protagonists are inwardly gaining in eloquence as their minds swarm with newly acquired words and phrases, at first topsy-turvily, on which they are striving to impose some order and thus endow with the potential to name what had hitherto been held back. Another function these silences perform is to enable the missing parts of conversations to be heard, particularly words that could or should have been said but were not, often with an inauspicious or even disastrous effect on the fates of the people involved. The silence and reticence intensify the echoes of both unanswered and unasked questions as well as the statements the protagonists choose to keep unuttered.

The echoes of the unspoken words thus resound in their mind, help them make sense of the past and, in consequence, constitute the crucial impetus to find their voice and take the initiative. Swift's silence is therefore less a display of postmodern playfulness or a retarding device that hinders the exposition of truth than "a dynamic and positive form of silence", that is "silence as a creative force that facilitates an imaginative and intuitive apprehension of the world" (Winsworth 61). The crucial issue here is that this understanding is often not a result of a rational cognitive process but is rather some kind of epiphany on the level of the sub/unconscious. Due to the distinctive choice of having an orphaned girl as its main protagonist, who manages to progress from being an ordinary maid and later a bookshop assistant to becoming a recognised writer, *Mothering Sunday* features diverse forms of silences – forced, necessary or voluntary, as will be shown later.

### **The Extraordinary Immediacy of the Ordinary**

In order to approach Swift's exploration of the themes of language, voice and storytelling it is necessary to mention his views on writing, the genre of the novel and the relationship between fiction and reality. He claims that they stem from his creative principle of finding "the extraordinary in the ordinary", which is why his novels "start by being familiar, but they become less familiar" (Craps, "Interview" 652). Due to this primary focus on the mundane and habitual, in which Swift looks for the extraordinary and unfamiliar, he has been labelled "England's laureate of the everyday" (Keenan), and is renowned for his skill to reveal "the hidden poetry" in ordinary people's lives (Goring). Swift's novels are therefore a peculiar compound of diversity and range of characters, whether a university lecturer, news photographer, insurance clerk, private eye or farmer, and the mundanity of their daily life. He insists that "the fundamental task of literature is to enable us to enter, imaginatively, experiences other than our own" (Swift, "Throwing Off" 20), which can be found in the vast otherness of every individual, their unique experience and mental world.

As a writer Swift aims at portraying universal and timeless aspects of human existence, and he believes that this can be achieved through the prism of the everyday and the local. While the backdrop of his stories are great and life-changing upheavals, such as the

two World Wars, the war in former Yugoslavia, the BSE and foot-and-mouth epidemics, and the Iraq War, their forefront is reserved for ordinary people whose day-to-day life to some extent has been affected by these events but who have to go on living it nevertheless. "However 'global' we like to think", Swift notes, "we've become, it remains true that life is about our little corner, our little nook, our little niche, our little territory. It's a small world, but that small world opens up to the big world" (Craps, "Interview" 652).

Swift's point is that a novel cannot be strictly about the present or restricted to a single period of time but should present a whole life as there is no limit to the amount of history the genre can embrace (Keenan). For this it demands slowness and patience, "to take the long view, to show change and evolution, human behaviour worked on by time" (Swift on 'contemporary' novels). What the novel must have, rather than a "nowness", is an immediacy which bestows upon the narration a genuineness and credibility that grip readers and make the story seem very real to them, thus rendering its chronology and geography secondary, and which is "closely bound up with intimacy" (Swift, "As a novelist"). And it is this immediacy that allows him, and his readers in consequence, to get as close as possible to his characters and enter a moral dimension of fiction. This, he believes, "is governed by empathy, compassion, and a preparedness to suspend an easy judgement on anyone who features in the story", as well as "the ability not to be just a solipsistic unit but to imagine what it's like to be someone else" (Craps, "Interview" 649, 651). His novels offer an insight into what is happening inside his characters, especially into the thoughts and feelings they do not intend to show or say aloud, to examine the volatile and intangible relationship between the human psyche and the outside world, and thus to do what cannot be done in reality: freeze, immortalise a moment so it can be relived again, "grasp the fleeting, vanishing stuff of existence and make it always there" (Swift, "As a novelist") and explore the very transitoriness of life.

Language plays a fundamental role in this endeavour. While leading their ordinary, familiar lives, the protagonists do not perceive it as a problem – since they do things automatically, out of habit and hardly ever feel the need to talk about them excessively, and, even if they do, their verbal devices are sufficient for that. Yet, when a fatal moment turns their life upside down, making it unfamiliar and intangible, they suddenly find themselves nonplussed. They cannot grasp the new situation as they are unable to capture it in words, to name the cause of their unease, because their habitual vocabulary proves inadequate to the task. Out of perplexity and panic they at first resort to reticence, but as the unspoken experience buffets them strongly they cannot but embark on the difficult quest to find the words to voice it out of the unconscious. In some of his early novels there are protagonists who are educated people and skilled speakers, like Tom Crick in *Waterland* and Bill Unwin in *Ever After* (1992) but the accomplishment of Swift's later novels rests in giving emotional depth to characters who have great difficulties in finding this voice by themselves, like the group of friends in *Last Orders* (1996), George Webb in *The Light of Day* and Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here*. Their predicament makes the reader identify more easily with these characters, since, as Swift notes, "we are all, from time to time, inarticulate, at some level, about some things" (Keenan). This line of untutored protagonists in search of words is followed by Jane Fairchild in *Mothering Sunday*.

### In Search of Words and Voice

Apart from the third-person narration of limited omniscience and the theme of finding one's language, *Mothering Sunday* shares with *Wish You Were Here* the protagonist's background as an ordinary person with little formal education and the triggering moment being the death of a close person. However, the stories differ in almost all other respects.<sup>1</sup> Jane Fairchild, the protagonist of *Mothering Sunday*, is a well-voiced woman, which marks a change from Swift's series of silent and silenced women characters "in the sense that they remain undeveloped as autonomous individuals, being mediated to us through the male narrative discourse" (Widdowson 112). She is optimistic, vigorous, open, observant and even outspoken within the limits of her job as a maid in a rich family's household, with a thirst for life and little regret for the past. Her fate as a motherless foundling raised in an orphanage has taught her to take things as they come and appreciate their brighter side. Moreover, the news of the death of Paul Sheringham, an upper-class man from Berkshire with whom she had a clandestine sexual affair for almost seven years, no matter how shocking it was in its unexpectedness, can hardly be considered a truly traumatising event in the long run. She has no share of guilt at his death to trouble her conscience, and although she had some feelings for Paul and in her dreams even cherished the vain hope of living by his side, she is well aware that for him the relationship was mainly physical and that it was coming to its end as he was soon to enter a pragmatic marriage with a rich young lady and move to London. By the time the news of his death reached her, she had already come to terms with and accepted the fact that she was going to lose him as a lover and friend.

In Jane's need to find her language, and her curiosity about how language works and what it means, she is close to George Webb from *The Light of Day*, another Swift novel that centres on an initially inarticulate person's quest for language. In fact, in spite of the differences in setting, the time in which the story is set and the protagonist's gender, age and background, the two novels have more in common than may initially appear to be the case. The crucial moment in George's life, when his client unexpectedly kills her unfaithful husband, is not for him a traumatising one, but although he is involved in the matter rather indirectly it does turn his life upside down as he decides to wait for his beloved for years, visiting her in prison twice a month. The incident changes his life in one more significant way – it turns him into a writer of a kind, when Sarah asks him to produce for her "reports from the world" (*The Light of Day* 185). Writing down what is happening around him, not to mention his emotions, is a new and demanding task for George, as he has not been used to putting things into words; in his job, his role is to listen, watch and keep secrets.

However, George is willing to learn because of Sarah, and the first step is to start thinking about words. Having done his homework for almost two years he finds his way to language, taking words seriously, no longer considering them "just bits of air" (*The Light of Day* 133), an immaterial, enigmatic substance, but "as real as rocks" (*The Light of Day* 227), powerful tools that can not only describe reality but also enliven it or even affect it. He has learnt that words and phrases can manifest themselves by evoking feelings, stimulating the imagination and thus instigating thoughts and ideas; that words and phrases, even very common ones like "wrong", "a winter dusk" or "vacant possession", have their "shape, trace, scent" (*The Light of Day* 252). Although he knows that "words aren't things,

things aren't words" (*The Light of Day* 300–301), he realises that some of them can materialise for him, for instance, "corrupt" feels like a "strangely physical word. A black taste welling in your throat, a thickness on your tongue, as if you have a disease" (*The Light of Day* 179), while "a cold trail" is visualised as a "long empty path, stony and bare" (*The Light of Day* 308). And so he translates things into words, weaving them together into stories, but also coming to understand that certain things, especially those concerning the inside of the human mind, might never be known and will forever remain a "spring coiled inside us waiting for release" (*The Light of Day* 322).

The reversal in the course of Jane Fairchild's life also starts inadvertently, with her crossing a professional line – falling for the wrong person, in her case not a client but a member of the upper class. And, like George as a private eye, Jane as a maid is required to turn "a blind eye and a deaf ear and, above all, ke[ep] a closed mouth" (*Mothering Sunday*<sup>2</sup> 32), expected to respond to the world around only when asked and in a set of strictly prescribed phrases, which leaves her with very limited linguistic resources. Yet her inquisitiveness and eagerness to learn lead her to start thinking critically about words and the ways in which they can have meaning. Unlike George, the crucial stimulus for her to start her quest for a voice long precedes the life-changing moment – it comes when she is allowed by Mr Niven to read books from his library. This gradually helps her to develop her sense of language, and she becomes increasingly aware of the simultaneous beauty and intricacy of transforming lived experience into words, and the peculiar two-way interference between words and things. This experience with the language of fiction not only extends her vocabulary, but also makes her wonder about some newly acquired words and their rich connotations and metaphoricity. Having gathered up these words and phrases "like one of those nest-building birds outside" (*MS* 35), she cannot help toying with them in her mind and in the narration. And so, in typically Swiftian style, the ones she finds most noteworthy, such as "seed" or "yarn", recur in different situations and contexts, each time somehow modifying its previously contemplated meaning and emotional colour, thus adding new tiles to the mosaic of her language.

The use of cliché assumes a specific role in this process. Swift had also explored this theme in his previous novels, namely in *The Light of Day* and *Wish You Were Here*. As George's job consists mostly of dealing with a single, stereotypical situation – a husband's infidelity – his active vocabulary has been restricted to a few jargon phrases. Jack Luxton in *Wish You Were Here* is also a very inept language user. In fact, whenever he tries to express something he always finds himself short of words and ends up using clichéd phrases, such as the eponymous one on the holiday postcards to his girlfriend, which is why he has come to the conclusion that the best option for him in such cases is "to shut up or say very little" (*Wish You Were Here* 155). He considers these phrases artificial, but unlike George, he makes no effort to find better, more natural-sounding ones and instead resorts to taciturnity. However, neither of these novels is uncompromisingly dismissive of cliché. On the contrary, they work as a "skirmish not so much against as with cliché" (Wood). Some people in difficult life situations may find conventional expressions help them to cope, such as when withdrawn people like Jack or George express their feelings, or when the Nivens in *Mothering Sunday* obliquely refer to the loss of their two sons in the war. And cliché as such may not be harmful for storytelling either, as long as one knows how to handle it.

In *Mothering Sunday*, Swift presents this argument in its entirety: it is absolutely acceptable to use clichés when one is trying to create one’s language almost from scratch, because they can serve as stepping stones for the user to seek other, more original expressions. Jane comes to understand that frequent use may not deprive clichés of their meaning, that although clichés may sound strange they are still “sometimes actually true of what happened to people” (*MS* 11), and that provisionally helping herself with some of them may enable her to express what up to that point she has lacked words for: “Her heart had soared. Feast your eyes. A story was beginning” (*MS* 12). Jane’s professional trajectory, like George’s clumsy writing attempts but more explicitly so, can be taken as Swift’s “reminder of how important cliché is to living literature” (Wood). It literally endows her with a voice, and without acquiring this voice to start telling her story she would never have become a writer well-known for her ability “to deal intricately with words” (*MS* 96). Even clichés have a place in a writer’s vocabulary, though their role inevitably changes with time – while they can help a beginner lay the foundations of his/her narrative style, a skilled author may use them moderately to spice the narration with linguistic and stylistic curiosity, as a creative use of even a banal sentence in an unfamiliar context can make it sound powerful (Roblin 80). *Mothering Sunday* proves this, and indeed its thoughtful and multi-layered story begins with a conventional “Once upon a time” opening.

In her peculiar position, Jane has to speak more than just one kind of language. As a servant in an affluent household she is familiar with the maids’ slang and jargon and is able to use a simple register to talk to her less linguistically equipped colleagues. At the same time, she needs to have a command of various humble and polite formal expressions for communication with her employers. Moreover, as the mistress of a gentleman, she has used a hybrid of her colloquial language and an upper-class variant, which is not at odds with the intimacy of their relationship and also maintains some semblance of social hierarchy, supplemented with a few phrases from “her private unconfessable code-language, standing for so much that was beyond telling” (*MS* 33), devised to keep their affair secret from the outside world. However, while this heteroglossic capacity proves sufficient for the practical purposes of daily communication, she finds out that it does not do so when she has to accurately render what has happened and how she has felt about it. She discovers such material in books and immediately starts to absorb its vocabulary, yet in order to develop her own, distinctive writer’s language she first needs to find her voice. And this voice, as is usual in Swift’s novels, emerges from various forms of silence.

First of all there are the silences between Jane and Paul Sheringham, which spring from the mismatched character of their affair. There are things she does not dare tell him, such as that their relationship may have an emotional level enabling it to be called serious (*MS* 5), and there are things he does not want to reveal to her, above all his true feelings. Although sometimes it can be comforting for her, for example when he does not speak about his fiancée, in most cases it leaves her with even more silences in the form of unasked and unanswered questions, primarily those concerning the future of their liaison. Their intimate, post-coital moments abound in silence as he does not say what she hopes he could say, and, afraid of his possibly irritated reaction, she does not want to speak up so as not to spoil the precious moments, “to falsify – or nullify – anything by the folly of putting it into words” (*MS* 56) and disturb the illusion of their permanence. Then there is the reticence she resorts to when he eventually says he has to go, “as if enough silence after his remark,

for all its apparent call for punctuality, might cancel everything" (MS 38). Instead, she keeps lying on the bed watching him getting dressed slowly and unconcernedly, thinking about all the things she is not going to tell him, before blurring out a banal compliment to which he does not even bother to respond. And later, on top of all this, she has to keep silent when she hears the news of Paul's death so as not to give herself away, stifling her tears and her urge to scream in despair. All these silences only amplify the unsaid words as they recur in Jane's mind, resonate loudly, and call for a release which is granted when she projects them into her narratives.

The identity-forming silence continues after Paul departs. Jane, in the magic egalitarian spirit of "the perfect politics of nakedness" (MS 35), walks around the house in silence, through room after room, becoming conscious of herself as a unique human being with all her future possibilities ahead of her – "her own true, naked self, without the social definitions that imprison her" (Liu). This recognition, which is "almost a kind of rebirth" (Frostrup), reaches its peak in the "muted, suspended, immured" (MS 81) seclusion of the library whose knowing quietness makes her inner voice even stronger and more confident, and where she feels "like some welcome, innocent thief" (MS 76) of words, phrases, ideas and beliefs. Yet there is one more "silence" in Jane's life, a secret she has always held back from everybody. Although as a writer she has produced countless stories, many of which contain motifs and characters based on her own life, there is one story she will never tell: the one about how on a sunny Mothering Sunday in March 1924, a young maid in unbelievable circumstances – walking naked in a rich family's house where she is even not employed – realises what she wants from life through an epiphanic series of (self-)recognitions and embarks on the long struggle against being silenced by social conventions and prejudices in order to find her voice and assert herself as a writer. It is this silence that Swift's novel fills.

A determining aspect of depicting the quest for language is the form of the narration, especially its composition and perspective. The first refers especially to the way in which the narration works towards the disclosure of the story's crux. The actual action of Swift's preceding novels takes place in the present, but the sought-for truth lies in the past. The narrative then works through reminiscences and flashbacks as the protagonists strive to recollect and discover what really happened and how. This process is demanding for them, and so they tend to elude it by digressing to other topics and tales. The main plotline becomes fragmented, but after each interruption the narrators return to where they abandoned it. This narrative therefore advances in narrowing concentric circles, and each of these "returns" reveals a new detail which helps the protagonists to compose a more complete image of their centre, until the truth is fully known. *Mothering Sunday* in fact has the opposite composition: its main action takes place in the past, specifically on 30 March 1924, when the young Jane experiences the loss of her lover. The storyline is interrupted by flash-forwards to various periods of her later life, both personal and professional, covering the span of almost the whole rest of the century. The narration thus progresses in widening circles, where the unknown is not the centre but what it triggered and how her life developed subsequently. The fact that the narration does not head towards the revelation of a momentous secret or fact, but instead shows how one incident can fundamentally alter the course of life, changes its dynamics and mood, providing the author with more space to

explore themes which would otherwise be subordinate to that of the quest for truth, namely finding one's language and voice.

As for voice, Swift's first eight novels are told in the first person, which offers a very intense and intimate account that draws the reader deep inside the narrator's experience and emotion. This singularity of viewpoint can be undermined and partially dialogised by the employment of other speakers, like the alternating dual narrators in *Out of this World* (1988) or the multiple narrators in *Last Orders*, yet the inescapable subjectivity and bias of their versions cannot compensate for a reliable, detached perspective from outside. The story of *Wish You Were Here* is narrated in a close third person which adheres to the main protagonist's point of view, yet which is not his point of view *per se*. This kind of narration gives the story's psychological intensity a new twist as it grants readers access to Jack's mind but also confronts it with other characters' perspectives and authorial speech, making the discrepancy between how he sees himself and how others see him even more palpable. This difference in the form of narration has a crucial impact on the treatment of the theme of finding one's voice. While in the first person readers are invited to experience the narrators' toiling over the puzzling substance of language, the third person adds a level of reflection through the authorial "metalinguistic" commentary. This is the case in *Mothering Sunday*, all the more so because its main protagonist, though of low-class origin and poor education, eventually becomes a successful writer.

This authorial metacommentary gives the treatment of the theme of finding one's language a depth and complexity that is impossible to achieve through first person narration only. As it is told indirectly from the perspective of an adult person in various phases of her life and career, the narration makes use of the hindsight of a skilled writer and mature personality which allows it to keep a distance from what is actually happening and point out how it is later reflected in terms of her coming of age as well as her "coming of voice". Readers are given access not only to what Jane says and thinks, but also, and often equally importantly, to what she does not say and why, and what she would have said had she been equipped with the proper words and phrases. Readers not only learn how she contends with words and the pitfalls of their use, but also how they resonate and echo variously in her later life. By this Swift "achieves a delicate harmony between the cool detachment of the narrative voice and the intensity of emotion conveyed on every page" (Allfrey). And so, for instance, when Jane mentions the phrase "I'm mugging up", which Paul uses as a pretext to his parents and fiancée so he can spend the fateful day with her, we are informed that she "would never be able to hear the phrase lightly, even in Oxford, where a great deal of mugging up went on" (*MS* 33); when she retells, word for word, Paul's surprisingly aloof, matter-of-fact farewell speech, she adds that she has recalled it so often over the decades that it has turned into a sort of fiction as she "would brood over it like some passage that perhaps needed redrafting, that might not yet have arrived at its proper meaning" (*MS* 60); or when in retrospect she accentuates the milestone moments and events that marked her path to becoming a real writer.

The metafictional aspect of the novel rests in depicting what made Jane a writer and, along with this, what generally makes a writer. The first step is to "cross an impossible barrier" (*MS* 146), to find the strength and courage to overcome some seemingly insurmountable obstacle – and there may be several such barriers. In Jane's case these barriers relate to social background and gender, and her achievement is all the more admirable as all her

“unsilenced” female writing predecessors and contemporaries were not only not servants but indeed had servants or some other form of household help (Olsen 16). And there may be other less noticeable challenges, such as abandoning the secure real world of one’s experience in favour of letting one’s imagination take over and roam freely. The second, and most crucial, step is “finding *the* language” (*MS* 146, emphasis original) which would feel natural, efficient and apt to write in. Using Jane’s example, Swift shows that being a writer means an incessant, life-long commitment to language. Interestingly, Jane’s reflections on the nature of words and their relationship with reality strikingly resemble George Webb’s lay observation: “you have to understand that words are only words, just bits of air” (*MS* 109). However, as a writer, she goes further than George in his realisation that words can materialise for him and help him, at least for some time, to capture, pin down and make sense of a reality that is frequently elusive. Although she admits that a word is not a thing and a thing is not a word, she points out that in the realm of the imagination, words exercise a powerful spell over things:

But somehow the two – things – became inseparable. Was everything a great fabrication? Words were like an invisible skin, enwrapping the world and giving it reality. Yet you could not say the world would not be there, would not be real if you took away the words. At best it seemed that things might bless the words that distinguish them, and that words might bless everything. (*MS* 108)

If a writer finds a language that enwraps the world and gives it reality, and whose words bless the things they refer to by bringing them to life, then his/her fiction can achieve the immediacy Swift calls for and thus fulfil the primary goal of writing – “to embrace the stuff of life” (*MS* 111), to make it more tangible and graspable in defiance of its intrinsic inaccessibility.

The intertextual dimension of *Mothering Sunday* is also significant. Some critics and reviewers have noticed allusions to the historical television drama series *Downton Abbey* (2010) and the mystery film *Gosford Park* (2001) (cf. Gee, Kakutani), and some passages also seem to pay tribute to modernist writers, namely to Virginia Woolf’s lyricism and D.H. Lawrence’s earthiness. However, the novel’s most explicit invocation is that of Joseph Conrad. A legitimate, if not unavoidable, step in the process of finding one’s literary language is seeking inspiration in established writers, as long as inspiration does not turn into plagiarism. Jane finds such inspiration in Conrad’s novels. On the one hand, she finds his fictional worlds fascinating, his vocabulary and turn of phrase distinctive and captivating, in which specific expressions like “yarn” and “youth” seem to stand for an idea rather than just a word (*MS* 141), yet, on the other hand, any time she reads him she has “that feeling of entering unknown and possibly dangerous territory which, if she’d had the word, she might have called ‘Conradian’” (*MS* 145). This can refer to the novels’ plots and locales, but it can equally refer to her awareness that Conrad’s forceful style might easily overpower her own still developing language. She also finds his writing stimulating because of certain similarities between his and her lives: he too was orphaned, had a made-up name, received no training in writing and had to learn how to write in a whole new language. Conrad’s example is important for Jane not only in terms of language and

style, but also for her finding of her own voice – it bolsters her confidence and helps her find the strength to build up her professional identity, literally from nothing.

### **Of Fiction and Truth – Conclusion**

The story of an aspiring writer finding her language and becoming successful allows Swift to shape the novel's ending into a commentary on storytelling and writing fiction in general, a self-conscious and “glistening study of the writers' craft” (Hawkins). As Jane's is an ultimately storytelling mind, *Mothering Sunday* demonstrates the centrality of stories in our lives – that they shape our beliefs, behaviours and ethics, nourish our imagination, and create meaningful patterns where we cannot find them by imposing narrative structure on chaos and illogicality. Therefore, we automatically extract stories from the information we receive and happily invent the missing bits or even a whole new story where there is none (or only an unsatisfactory one), which is why we tell some of the best stories to ourselves (Gottschall). When Jane lacks some pieces of information, including unpleasant ones, she immediately makes them up, for instance, the scenes and dialogues between Paul and his fiancée. She knows it to be mere fabrication, though it is loosely based on a few known facts: “To imagine them was only to imagine the possible, even to predict the actual. But it was also to conjure the non-existent” (*MS* 63), yet it represented good practice in empathy and imagination, so essential for a future writer. When she sees Conrad's photograph she imagines an intimate scene with him in bed, both physical and mental, “just to lie beside him, not speaking, a naked, ageing Conrad, both of them looking up and watching the smoke of their cigarettes rising, mingling under the ceiling, as if the smoke held some truth greater than either of them could find words for” (*MS* 147). Imagining for her thus becomes the most exciting of adventures, a very emotional thing full of great sweetness, as Swift puts it (Marriott), though one which involves a degree of “constant mental hazard-ing” (*MS* 89) – hazarding with her name, with her readers' tastes and expectations, and, last but not least, with truth.

“A storyteller by trade” (*MS* 99), Jane is well aware that in fiction the notion of truth should be perceived differently than in real life. What she has now, at the end of her life and career, are all the scenes, real and fictitious, and if she wishes to recount her life truthfully she has to carefully distinguish between them. However, in creative writing the correspondence between words and reality is of negligible consequence, as in its essence it needs to fabricate, and thus in a way “trad[e] in lies” (*MS* 140). Yet, at the same time, she knows that good fiction also contains truth in that it is authentic to the fabric of human life and human character. This truthfulness can only be achieved through immediacy, that is in getting as close as possible to the heart of what is being rendered, trying to capture “the very feel of being alive” (*MS* 147), which is also how fiction fulfils its ethical dimension. A significant part of this, however, is the ability to admit and accept that certain aspects will always remain unspoken, “that many things in life – oh so many more than we think – can never be explained at all” (*MS* 149). The fact that Swift identifies with Jane's views can be seen, besides what he says in interviews and articles, also in the narrative itself; for instance, we can share the weight and intensity of Jane's joy in life and eagerness for what the future has in store for her when she is cycling away from the Sheringhams' house, although it is just a fleeting moment:

Peddalling hard at first, then freewheeling and gathering speed, she heard the whirr of the wheels, felt the air fill her hair, her clothes and almost, it seemed, the veins inside her. Her veins sang, and she herself might have sung, if the rushing air had not stopped her mouth. She would never be able to explain the sheer liberty, the racing sense of possibility she felt. (*MS* 92)

Leaving one phase of her life behind, Jane exemplifies that at times a loss turns out to be a gift in that it brings a new course in one's life. This passage, whose poetic wording Swift sportively rounds off with an earthy anti-climax, "The air was up her skirt and a Dutch cap up her fanny" (*MS* 93), convincingly captures the immediacy of her mood and feelings and the transience of the experience, while the true cause of her sudden excitement and delight defies rational explanation and thus remains beyond telling. Indeed, many other important things in her life and career are omitted, such as how she came to marry her husband, an Oxford graduate and philosopher, while, with a sense of detail, the narration focuses on the individual little "seeds of her vocation" (Kakutani).

*Mothering Sunday* is the shortest of Swift's novels, so elliptical that it borders on being a novella, yet generically it is difficult to categorise as it "builds in complexity with its layering of revelations and memories over time" (McAlpin). With its "Once upon a time" opening and "You shall go to the ball" *Cinderella* epigraph it has the loose fairy-tale framework of an unprivileged maidservant turning into a literary queen, yet the novel has many more layers of meaning than are found in a stereotypical narrative for the young. Another clue Swift offers is the subtitle "A Romance", but even this is partly a false lead; although the story opens with a romance, or more precisely with the end of a romance, what follows by far exceeds the limits of this genre. It is easier to find parallels with the genre's original form as a heroic tale in which protagonists undergo exhausting adventures on their quest and are rewarded not only with what they sought, but also with "an improved character – tested, rebuked, and strengthened" (Keen 11), yet still this covers only a part of the plot. What starts as a love story gradually evolves into an insightful and intimate contemplation on writing and literature, "an elegant reflection on the impulse to tell stories" (Charles), and, in a broader sense, on the sometimes wonderful intricacies of life. In fact, it can be taken as a romance in the modern sense, but a romance with words, with language, which grows into a life-long engagement. It is the coming-of-age as well as "coming-of-voice" story of a writer whose imagination can work wonders, yet who is forever fated to be "constantly beset by the inconstancy of words" (*MS* 108). By bringing the narrative method of verbal brevity, silences and reticence to perfection, Swift achieves a remarkable eloquence and clarity when it comes to the message it aims to convey. And so, in spite of the background of terrible losses, *Mothering Sunday* is his most cheerful and optimistic, though also his most self-reflexive novel to date.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One of the key differences is the focus on trauma and guilt. For a detailed analysis of these themes in *Wish You Were Here* see the article “The Specters of the Unspoken Past – Trauma in Graham Swift’s *Wish You Were Here*”.

<sup>2</sup> In subsequent references abbreviated as *MS*.

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# In the Eye of the Storm: The Motif of Silence in A. L. Kennedy's Early Short Stories: *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains*

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## Abstract

*The traditional dismissive view of female identity characteristic of the strongly masculinised Scottish culture used to trap potential women artists into passivity. Alison Louise (A. L.) Kennedy seems to be suspended between extremes in responding either by silence or maddening eloquence. Kennedy's short stories are multi-faceted, unpredictable organisms which relentlessly experiment with various means of expression and continually challenge the reader's expectations. I have chosen only one of the facets, Kennedy's use of silence in places that seem to call for explanation, silence as a bridge that may paradoxically lead to revealing a significant meaning in the form of epiphany. I have opted for her very first collection of short stories, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990), to demonstrate that this unique narrative device is present and functional even in her early fiction.*

*Keywords: Narration, short story, A. L. Kennedy, Scottish identity, Caledonian antiszygy, identity self-fashioning, narrative strategies, defamiliarisation, contemporary British women writers*

## 1. Quest for Identity

Since her literary debut, a collection of short stories entitled *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990), A. L. Kennedy has become a most distinctive, quizzical, perplexing, beloved, and influential presence among the *literati* of Scotland and Britain as a whole. Kennedy has been a steady recipient of literary prizes since the publication of *Night*

*Geometry and the Garscadden Trains*, and having received her fair share of them, she has also found herself in the position of bestowing awards while still in her prime as a woman and a writer. Without any doubt, A. L. Kennedy ranks among those personalities who have widened contemporary Scottish cultural and literary horizons.

But contemporary Scottish literature owes its remarkable variety to a relatively recent development. Not long ago, Scotland tended to be less than self-confident regarding its cultural heritage, particularly bemoaning the lack of art concerned with the everyday realities of ordinary people. Even such a significant novel as *Alasdair Gray's Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, published as late as 1981, is deeply troubled by the Scottish malaise:

Think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used imaginatively by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. . . . Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves. (243)

While Gray is writing specifically about Glasgow, his complaint could easily be extended to Scotland in general, because at that time Scotland's literary reputation still rested chiefly on the ballads of Robert Burns, the romantic historicism of Walter Scott and, in the twentieth century, the nationalist synthetic Scots poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid and the somewhat solitary figure of Muriel Spark. Of course, Scottish literature continued to be written, but there were few authors active between, say, the 1930s and 1970s who dealt with contemporary topics and exercised a significant influence on the following generations. Scottish writing was waiting to be revived and energised, and this is a change that occurred in the 1980s with a host of newly emerging writers – starting with the highly influential Alasdair Gray – who explored new directions in Scottish literature with a striking originality.

Kennedy, indisputably one of the writers of the so-called Second Literary Renaissance of the 1980s, seemed very slow about correcting Alasdair Gray by re-imagining Scotland in more positive and up-to-date terms; on the contrary, she follows his example, giving the idea of Scottishness an even more caustic spin in her own fiction, non-fiction, articles and even stand-up comedy. Here is a telling example from her first novel, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (1993), where Kennedy satirises Scotland's romanticisation of national history, withdrawal into an idealised past and avoidance of present-day challenges:

The purposes of the ceilidh, a uniquely unsullied flowering of Scottish culture, are many. Among these are the taking of spirituous liquors, the singing of songs, the playing of music, dancing, joking, wynching, fighting, greeting, eating stovies and looking at the moon while contemplating the certainty of death. . . . As the Israelites had their psalms, so we have the ceilidh. As the Africans transported to Haiti kept their voodoo, so we have the ceilidh. As every languageless, stateless, selfless nation has one last, twisted image of its worst and best, we have the ceilidh. Here we pretend we are Highland, pretend we have mysteries in our work, pretend we have work. We forget our record of atrocities wherever we have been made masters and become

comfortable servants again. Our present and our past creep in to change each other and we feel angry and sad and Scottish. Perhaps we feel free. (145–46)

Paradoxically, Scottish literature has grown in proportion and in quality since the publication of *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*. More than three decades later, readers as well as literary critics observe that Scottish literature enjoys good health (better than ever) and prides itself on a new generation of writers who are blazing trails in new areas. Lately, a number of Scottish writers have tackled previously neglected topics, including contemporary urban life, which, with the exception of the 1930s social realist novels of dubious artistic merit, was a virtually unexplored area until the gritty works of James Kelman, Irvine Welsh and others. A particularly dark strain of Scottish crime fiction, tartan noir, as represented by Ian Rankin, Denise Mina and Stuart MacBride, has meanwhile become Scotland's staple literary export product.

I am convinced that much of the contemporary success of Scottish culture in general, and literature in particular, is based on the phenomenon of “Caledonian antisyzygy.” This term was popularised<sup>1</sup> by Hugh MacDiarmid, who defined it as the conjunction of opposites, a reflection of contrasts that may be applied to Scottish life and culture in general, because only Scots have such a large capacity for containing in themselves and their art elements that contradict each other. Although the concept of Caledonian antisyzygy is not a novel invention and is based on a degree of speculation rather than a scientific fact, it has been central to Scottish imagination, starting with R. L. Stevenson's seminal novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which continues to be rewritten, reimagined and referenced in Scottish writing even today. Kennedy's explanation of the “gravest” importance of an indescribably flimsy, marginal “ceilidh” points towards a sign of the cultural weakness of the Scots in a milieu that operates within the context of the centre-versus-margin dichotomy. As a result, the Scottish polyphonic<sup>2</sup> literary tradition was perceived in terms of sets of binary oppositions, where Scottish became the repressed “other” of what English was not: dark as opposed to enlightened, backward as opposed to advanced, parochial and primitive versus sophisticated.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. A Helpful Yoke

For a long time, women writers were excluded from the Scottish literary canon, let alone the British one, partly because of their Scottishness and partly because of their gender, since writing, especially in Scotland, was presented as a predominantly male activity. Janice Galloway, Kennedy's contemporary, demonstrates this when she describes her feelings of guilt for “not backing up our menfolk and their ‘real’ concerns. Female concerns, like meat on mother's plate, are extras after the men and weans have been served” (5–6). Against all the odds, there has been a striking expansion of Scottish women's writing in recent years, some of them willingly accepting their lot – the conjunction of opposites, ambivalence, paradox – and others challenging literary, social and gender stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> A. L. Kennedy seems both to despair of the ambivalence of her legacy and yet still embrace it in a cheerful, even wanton manner. Women writers such as Kennedy may perceive themselves as a marginalised minority within an already marginalised literary tradition; on the other hand, they thrive on the very existence of restrictions and walls to break down. The

protean, ever-changing quality of Scottishness enables a writer never to define their identity irreversibly. The ambivalence of being balanced between Scottish and British cultures, writing from the margins while working within a broader British and European context, is rich in possibilities. It should not come as a surprise that Kennedy has a reputation for being ambivalent about her job, in love with words and polyphonic voices, always playing hide-and-seek with those who venture too close.

A. L. Kennedy ranks among the volatile writers who actively refuse to be associated with any limiting labels, such as “Scottish writer,” “woman writer” or even “feminist writer.” Despite her rejection of ideological concepts and critical categories, the very fact that Kennedy happens to be Scottish and female and as often as not opts for Scottish settings and female protagonists makes her work ultimately relevant in the discourse concerning Scottish identity and the position of women. In her volume *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* and elsewhere, the author prefers bleak urban settings, usually not explicitly named but at the same time readily recognisable from various interspersed details as Scotland, or, more specifically, Glasgow. Kennedy is preoccupied with depicting the seemingly inconsequential struggles of unexceptional characters: mostly working-class, often but not always female, and typically people who are exploited, abused and oppressed. Some of the stories in *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* veer towards magical realism, notably “Translations” and “Cap O’Rushes,” which will be discussed in more detail later. Regarding Kennedy’s utilisation of magical realism, gothicism and fantasy, Kaye Mitchell observes: “Experiments in form and style, including the use of fantasy, have frequently been viewed as offering women writers the opportunity to posit alternative realities, to critique the ‘naturalness’ of the (patriarchal) reality which they are compelled to inhabit and to express the fragmentary or alienated nature of female experience” (23). Even though Kennedy can hardly be seen as a straightforward feminist with an obvious agenda, her writings relentlessly comment on what it feels like to be a woman in general, and a woman in Scotland in particular.

As for Kennedy’s sharply observed portrayals of the peculiarly Scottish experience, Mitchell concludes that Kennedy’s works “all contribute to and disseminate some idea of ‘Scotland’ and ‘Scottishness,’ regardless of her desire for her writing to be judged independent of considerations of national identity. In producing some kind of narrative of Scotland, however, her writings do emphasise precisely that heterogeneity and ambiguity which the very notion of nationhood has sought, strategically, in the name of unity, to suppress” (45). There is no single unitary Scottish national identity, and any effort to establish such a sentiment will come out forced and inauthentic, as in Kennedy’s *ceilidh*. Even the century-old, now slightly outdated binary notion of Caledonian antiszygy – currently being revised into the more accurate idea of multiculturalism – already acknowledged the inevitable existence of contradictory characteristics within one person as well as within one nation. Any identity, whether individual or national, is a multifaceted entity, and what Kennedy does is explore some of the many facets of Scottishness rather than seeking to set up one definitive version of it.

### 3. Writing: A Paradoxical Activity

Much has been written on Kennedy's ambivalent approach to her craft. She is a solitary being, the only creature in a rather solipsistic universe she has created for herself, but at the same time a writer, dependent on a response by definition, forever reaching out to communicate with her readers, or at least with herself, the most important consumer of her fiction. Sarah M. Dunnigan comments on Kennedy's elusive ways thus: "unwilling to be pinned down to any literary philosophy or credo of gender or nationalism" (145). "When I write," observed Kennedy, "my aim is to communicate, person to person. . . . If I respect my reader and am willing to enter into a relationship of trust, if not love, with them, I would prefer not to be labelled and categorized in return" ("Changing" 100–02). Kennedy will not have her artistic creativity restricted by limiting labels; she both refuses to describe her own work in specific terms and also expects the reader to approach her writing with an open mind, without bias or prior expectations as to what it should be like.

Kennedy pays little attention to the public persona of a writer; she willingly reduced her name to initials,<sup>5</sup> rendering her gender invisible and enjoying freedom from being slotted into the category of women writers and the expectations that duly follow it. In a way, Kennedy has found freedom by continually reducing her characters to a series of disembodied voices, each of them having a story to tell. Those who are obsessed with biographical details about Kennedy ultimately find them, perhaps surprisingly, in her books of non-fiction, *On Bullfighting* (1999) and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1997). The texts feature Kennedy – otherwise a person very protective of her privacy – as being as truthful and (even brutally) honest about herself as possible and also as generous as possible with her innermost thoughts. However, one may not always like what one finds, having looked for "the real Kennedy." The opening lines of *On Bullfighting* calmly announce her desire to die, to kill herself by jumping out of her window on the fourth floor: "It's only me I want to kill. And I don't wish to be gawped at while I'm killing. I believe I've had enough embarrassment for one life. . . . I would like to think otherwise, but currently, I don't" (Kennedy, *Bullfighting* 1–2). One cannot help thinking Kennedy might be pulling one of her protective tricks by inviting the reader to share the most personal, intimate details imaginable, since people generally wish to be spared certain kinds of details and run away from morbidity, not toward it. Apparently, the idea of "A. L. Kennedy" might turn out to be a textual construct, an artistic creation not dissimilar to her own writing.

The less attention she pays to herself as the author, the more care she invests in her characters. I have opted to discuss her early prose since I am convinced it serves as a springboard and it already contains most of the elements that characterise her subsequent fiction. She portrays unimportant, common, helpless, voiceless people in precarious situations – victims, loners, and failures. To them, love or friendship is painful, out of reach, or even impossible. Kennedy's realistic stories are often seasoned with Gothic elements, and employ fragmentation and defamiliarisation, in contrast to her characters' (vain) attempts to communicate a sane message.

### 4. Silence and Storm

Kennedy's preoccupation with the motif of silence means that her readers are presented with a particularly challenging task. Kennedy taunts the reader by suggesting, implying,

but never telling directly and thus satisfying the curious reader with an easy answer. There are no ready answers in *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* as the characters meet with what are often Gothic, grotesque and fantastic incidents and struggle to make sense of their confusing experience. In some stories, the protagonists face an epiphany which undermines their knowledge of themselves, others and the world at large, leaving them groping for words to adequately describe what they are going through. Other stories present vulnerable characters, often women and children subjected to domestic violence or other forms of abuse, who find their experience too traumatic to be acknowledged, still less articulated. What gives Kennedy's stories their Gothic chill is precisely their silence, rife with possible meanings. Monica Germanà concludes that the trope of silence is the salient feature of Scottish Gothic, whose horror often derives from "the coming to terms with the fear of not knowing what one is" (5).

No text can exist without its reader, someone to piece together the puzzle.<sup>6</sup> The whimsical narrator often sprinkles the text with possible clues, but these turn out to be perfect pieces of cleverly engineered manipulation, and the answer is to be found either in the fleeting and the fragmented, or in the very silence itself – the in-between-ness, the words not uttered but only hinted at or circled around, the silence within the storm of words. Kennedy often lulls the reader into a false sense of security, only to peel away the protective cocoon bit by bit, finally to confront the reader with a shocking epiphany. "The Role of Notable Silences in Scottish History," a short story that promises much (since Kennedy ["Changing" 102] claims: "Because I love Scotland I will always seek to write about it as enough of an outsider to see it clearly . . . I hope to communicate a truth beyond poisonous nationalism or bigotry."), turns out to contain very little about Scotland. What is more, by the author's own admission, all of the tale she has been spinning so far is a lie: "None of this is true, of course, but it is far more interesting than a brown and green glen with rocky grey bits and a couple of sheep . . . And there is no point in being Scottish if you can't make up your past as you go on. Everyone else does" (Kennedy, *Night* 63–64). Here, Kennedy comments on Scotland's tendency to romanticise its past to the point when it becomes more of a fictional story than a factual history.

And instead of her view of silences in the nation's history, Kennedy presents a series of apparently random factoids to the unsuspecting reader. Instead of seeing those snippets meet and fold together into a neatly organised narrative, the reader is suddenly rebuffed with the notion of another silence – the one that roars about us, ominous, ever-present, in the knowledge that each of us must join it one day, to become a silenced nonentity. As much as the author loves silence, there is nothing that haunts her as much as the idea of this silence.

The simple language fits the naivety of the characters, and therefore some experience may be beyond words, silenced, since the character lacks knowledge of what is going on. The task of searching for an explanation is thus delegated to the reader. Mitchell points out Kennedy's usage of the technique of defamiliarisation "as a way of approaching subjects that might otherwise be considered non-narratable. In brief, it can be used as a way of dealing with trauma" (51). This utilisation of the technique is illustrated in "Translations," where the young Indian boy can hardly explain away his sudden, impulsive drives to violence, since no psychology lesson can give him insight into certain aspects of living in an old magician's hut:

When he was old . . . he still dreamed of the One Handed Man and the nights in his hut. He would wake and remember the hand and the ointment, pushing between his legs, sliding and hot, the other arm around his stomach, gripping, and the ugly pressure of the stump against his thigh. He remembered he was no longer in possession of himself, when he was an empty thing. Most of all he would remember how much he believed it was magic that was pumping into him. (Kennedy, *Night* 13)

In “Tea and Biscuits,” a young woman, a former blood donor, picks a man a generation older than herself to find steady happiness with him, much to her own surprise and satisfaction. As a gesture of gratitude, she decides to become a regular donor again. The atmosphere changes as sinister hints begin swirling around the page, until the reader is finally able to do as the character does, to pick up the pieces of a shattered life, or what remains of the life of an HIV-positive person: “And now I am not what I thought I was. I am waiting to happen. I have a clock now, they told me that. A drunk who no longer drinks is sober, but he has a clock because every new day might be the day that he slips. I have a clock like that. I look at my life backwards and all of it is winding down. I think that is how it will stay. I think that’s it” (Kennedy, *Night* 8).

“The Moving House” also uses a favourite organising principle, the importance of which is not uttered. Its character is a schoolgirl with a new address and a new stepfather, silently pondering the unspeakable horror her new life has in store for her:

Please, Grace. Grace. Fuckun say it. You won tell. You don even think about it. Stupid cunt. Nobody’s gonny believe you. Who are you? You’re fuckun nuthun. See if they do believe you; they’ll say it was your own fault. You. Pretty, Gracie, fuckun you. Just you fuckun sleep on that. You do not tell. Think I couldn make it worse? You do not fuckun tell. (Kennedy, *Night* 41)

Next morning on her ride to school the girl sits in the car in bewildered yet helpless silence, while a storm rages outside, in the mind of the reader, who has been led into recognition of the true nature of events the author has been circling around so far.

Finally, Kennedy’s meditation on “the unfamiliarity of the apparently familiar” (Mitchell 50) is most pronounced in “Cap O’Rushes,” a playful take on a well-known fairy story, in which a courageous girl finds a way out of her present misery. The female protagonist determines her own family, her three sons and husband, are goblins.

If there was anything which had convinced her that Colin was the Goblin King, then it was probably his shirts. His shirts, even very new shirts, not yet washed, would change when he put them on. The layers that made up his collars would bubble and peel away from each other, like paint on an old door. Clothing seemed to decompose around him and within hours it would seem he had brought it from his grave. There was something about him rotten. Rotting. (Kennedy, *Night* 111)

The more the woman watches her family, the more disturbing and bestial they become. At some point, she cannot even abide their smelly presence and their sloppy table manners: “Colin’s jaws would slap together and suck apart, answered by miniature slaps and sucks

from his sons. They did not eat, they consumed. Forks, hands, spoons were filled, scraps pursued, juices sopped. The mouths were always open, anxious, grim” (Kennedy, *Night* 113). The protagonist leaves the goblin household and makes a good life for herself, ultimately finding a home that suits her and a job she likes. The nameless woman’s household of brutes feels like a light-hearted dig at traditional Scottish working-class masculinity with some stereotypical behaviour attached. The female turns out to be an unreliable narrator after all. She congratulates herself on having escaped the Goblin King and rejoices in finding a flat and a job that conform to her tastes – devoid of people, of humans, of close, let alone intimate, relationships. The outcome of the story hinges on an ambivalence embedded in the text. Who is identified as the monster in this text? An oppressed fairytale girl may be entitled to cut and run to save herself, but the idea of a real – perhaps Scottish – mother of three leaving her home without as much as a glance back or a thought is going to haunt the text more effectively than any presence of goblins ever could.

## 5. Conclusion

A. L. Kennedy’s first volume of short stories is striking for its overall diversity despite the material she has used – small people, losers, psychiatric cases, victims of love that hurts or is not given. Kennedy is determined that these “insignificant” people lost in silence are to be given voice in her stories, but not necessarily by pointing at their lot directly. The stories do contain a central revelation, but it is arrived at through various techniques, defamiliarisation being one of her favourites. Kennedy, with her typical evasiveness, seems to point out that no words speak louder than the ominous silence of the recognition of the true nature of events one has been oblivious to so far. And therefore, the idea of “the eye of the storm,” the quiet, motionless, yet most dangerous place imaginable, might, as a bold oxymoron, well befit Kennedy’s courageous prose.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term was in circulation even before Hugh MacDiarmid’s *New Renaissance* in the 1920s and 1930s (Walker 15–16).

<sup>2</sup> Polyphony refers to the coexistence of a multitude of voices and viewpoints which interact dynamically but are never subsumed into one unifying discourse. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s novels characteristically manifest “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices.” Bakhtin argues that “what unfolds in his [Dostoevsky’s] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; yet rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin 3).

<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha might add more features of the colonised nation (which Scotland had truly become on the dissolution of its national parliament in Edinburgh to merge with the British Parliament in Westminster in 1707; hence a “languageless, stateless” part of Great Britain) and the subsequent rise of postcolonial nations (Padley 175–77).

<sup>4</sup> Besides Kennedy and Galloway, both of whom published their first works at the turn of the 1990s, other major contemporary women writers include, for example, Kate Atkinson, Ali Smith and Louise Welsh.

<sup>5</sup> “The authors I first loved all had initials—J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, E. Nesbit, e. e. cummings – and I actively did not want to know who they were or have them get in the way of my enjoying their story and their voice” (qtd. in Bedell). And obviously, Kennedy chooses “A. L.” over “Alison Louise,” hiding her female identity since “Male writers are allowed just to write, to just be . . . You are a writer. It is a non-sex-specific word because it is very often about areas in which you are not gender-identified” (Mansfield 107).

<sup>6</sup> Reader-response critical theory, as formulated by Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1976), works with the concepts of the implied reader and narrative gaps. The implied reader fulfils two interrelated functions: that of “a textual structure” and that of “a structured act.” The implied reader as a textual structure covers “the reader’s point-of-view as found within the text” (Iser 35). The reader’s point of view is that of his or her own experience, which is the lens through which the reader approaches the text. Individual experience, beliefs, and bias affect the way the text is perceived by a particular reader. In the act of reading, the reader forms a set of constantly evolving expectations, most of which will be frustrated as the text unfolds. The reader as a structured act refers to the expectations that are formulated, thwarted, and reformulated in the process of the negotiation of the text by the reader. The reader’s expectations seek to fill in the narrative gaps on the basis of the clues provided by the text itself. The reader actively interacts with the text and becomes a creator of the text’s meanings rather than a passive recipient of pre-existing meanings.

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# “We’ll call it a draw”: Footballing against late capitalism with Terry Eagleton

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## Abstract

*This article studies the ways in which the Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton has addressed the current fascination with football as a phenomenon symptomatic of the late capitalist economy. The article further investigates Eagleton’s critique of the social and cultural significance of football as a textual strategy assisting him in building a persuasive line of argument in favour of traditional philosophical categories, which he is trying to recover from deconstructionist and poststructuralist assaults. The article therefore reads Eagleton’s writings on football in the context of his larger project of writing against postmodernism and its cultural and political complacency.*

*Keywords: Eagleton, Frankfurt School, football, capitalism, morality*

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What happens when a leading literary theorist addresses some uncomfortable issues surrounding the most popular game of our times? After all, at least at first sight, the world of football would seem to have very little to do with the world of literature. Each is thought to have a fundamentally different fan base, as affection for these two distinct pastimes is considered to stem from entirely different psychological make-ups. In other words, a person who unconditionally embraces the aesthetics of a ball hitting the net will probably be less willing to appreciate the aesthetics of a softly toned poem. Not to mention the assumption that the exquisitely nuanced response from a reader to a literary text appears to be at loggerheads with a stadium crowd’s crude and guttural response to a situation on the pitch. However, the difference in the actual reception of a literary text as opposed to

the reception of a sporting event is in fact not that dissimilar to how, as early as 1935, in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin described the difference in the reception of “auratic” art, embedded in tradition, and designed for introverted contemplation, and the “distracted,” mass reception of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Ever the dialectician, Benjamin was not entirely critical of such a distracted mode of reception of art – particularly film but also sports – and he attempted to highlight its potentially democratizing properties by claiming that “it is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert” (231). Whether cheering from the stands, or from in front of the TV screen, football audiences find themselves inscribed into the game itself.

Indeed, for the literary theorist Terry Eagleton, it is sports, and football in particular, that in the current era enables ordinary people, including the underprivileged and the uneducated, to bask in the glory of expertise. In his 2010 *Guardian* article called “Football: a dear friend to capitalism,” he states the following:

Men and women whose jobs make no intellectual demands can display astonishing erudition when recalling the game’s history or dissecting individual skills. Learned disputes worthy of the ancient Greek forum fill the stands and pubs. Like Bertolt Brecht’s theatre, the game turns ordinary people into experts.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that Eagleton actually endorses the promise of football’s emancipating potential. The passage above is rather misleading in this sense. In the full context of Eagleton’s thought-system, football all but epitomizes the worst aspects of the current socio-political order.

In his somewhat immodestly entitled 2007 book *Meaning of Life*, Eagleton speaks of capitalist modernity as a situation where “culture was largely a matter of how to keep people harmlessly distracted when they were not working” (22). It is therefore hardly surprising that “in our own time, one of the most popular, influential branches of the culture industry is unquestionably sport” (26). Naturally for a theorist with Western-Marxist leanings, Eagleton uses the term “culture industry” negatively, in a vein established by critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, particularly Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose collaborative study *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1944, claimed that the culture industry was a force synonymous with mass deception, resulting in the homogenization, neutralization and stultification of the consumers’ cognition and perception. By calling what the culture industry actually produces “aesthetic barbarism” (104), Adorno and Horkheimer were clearly charging it with the active promotion of fascism. Taking this cue, Eagleton also points to the ways in which football, this most prominent branch of the culture industry, appeals to the spectator’s basest, blood-related and therefore easily manipulated instincts and desires:

If you were to ask what provides some meaning in life nowadays for a great many people, especially men, you could do worse than reply ‘Football’. [...] In Britain in particular, [football] stands in for all those noble causes – religious faith, national sovereignty, personal honour, ethnic identity – for which, over the centuries, people

have been prepared to go to their deaths. [It] involves tribal loyalties and rivalries, symbolic rituals, fabulous legends, iconic heroes, epic battles, aesthetic beauty, physical fulfilment, intellectual satisfaction, sublime spectaculars, and a profound sense of belonging. (Meaning 26)

There are at least two moments in the passage which merit further comment. One is Eagleton's inclusion of "religious faith" in the list of the supposedly noble causes provided by football. There is no doubt that especially in the secularized West, football has assumed the role of an *ersatz* religion, answering the need for an underlying meaning in people's otherwise hopelessly commodified lives. But what Eagleton is probably telling us here is that having assumed this role, football has become yet another symptom of the problem rather than its solution. In order to see just what the problem might be, it may prove useful to consult the work of yet another theorist related to the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm. In his 1977 book *To Have or to Be?*, Fromm speaks of a new religion, "the religion of industrialism and the cybernetic era" (117). According to Fromm, this religion goes unacknowledged as such, partly because its distinctive features run counter to the founding principles of Christianity – these features being, among others, "self-interest, mutual antagonism, property, profit, power" (119). In fact, it goes unacknowledged as religion because it is really a new form of paganism, something that Fromm fittingly calls "Western paganism" (117). What makes Fromm's observations particularly relevant as a supplement to Eagleton's characterization of contemporary football is that when looking for a clear demonstration of this new paganism in full force, Fromm comes up with what else but a disturbing critique of the biggest sporting event imaginable, the contemporary Olympic Games:

Consider the frenzied nationalism of people watching the contemporary Olympic Games, which allegedly serve the cause of peace. Indeed, the popularity of the Olympic Games is in itself a symbolic expression of Western paganism. They celebrate the pagan hero: the winner, the strongest, the most self-assertive, while overlooking the dirty mixture of business and publicity that characterizes the contemporary imitation of the Greek Olympic Games. (117)

The contemporary Olympic Games emerge from this scathing analysis as an event where "Western paganism" literally flexes its muscles built on the worship of self-interest, profit and unbridled competition. However, this analysis would seem not only to lend credibility to Eagleton's critical account of football, but also to introduce a more conciliatory note to the debate, because it subtly suggests that it is the commodification of the Olympics, their appropriation by the entrepreneurial forces of capitalism, that is the real culprit here, and that uncorrupted by these influences, the Olympics would be just fine – and so, by definition, would football.

The other item on Eagleton's list of "blessings" provided by football that deserves closer attention is the "sublime spectaculars." For by mentioning this, Eagleton is clearly referring to another prominent, and undoubtedly pathological, trait of the current era: our obsession with "spectacle." While Walter Benjamin may still have been partially appreciative of the "shock effects" exercised upon the spectators by "massified," mechanically

reproduced forms of art (Benjamin 238), for the French situationist Guy Debord, there was nothing whatsoever to be praised about the “society of the spectacle,” which is also the title of his influential study of an entirely commodified and alienated social reality. Writing in 1967, Debord speaks of the debilitating effects of the supreme rule of appearances and images – or spectacle – and describes a social reality that tends to reduce everything – from public events to the most intimate private affairs – to the level of an exciting sporting match. Viewed in this way, reality is translated into ready-made images that make the world readily eligible, and hence intensify its alienated status. In effect, Debord describes the spectacle as the inner logic of advanced capitalism:

The spectacle grasped in its totality is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. (444)

If, as the passage above indicates, the spectacle is the actual mode of current social life, it would also need to provide a sense of social coherence to hold the existing social set-up together. A crowd’s enjoyment of a sporting spectacle would then function as an obvious instance of such a socially cohesive force. According to Debord, though, spectacle can only provide a pseudo-sense of social unity because it really originates in and is sustained by separation:

The spectacle originates in the loss of the unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss. ... In the spectacle, one part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle in nothing more than the common language of this separation. What binds the spectators together is no more than an irreversible relation at the very centre which maintains their isolation. The spectacle reunites the separate, but reunites it as separate. (533)

A routinized way of tackling this prevailing sense of separateness and alienation is for the spectators to over-identify with the hero of the spectacle, the celebrity. The problem with this move is that by projecting their unrealized dreams, unfulfilled desires and un-lived lives onto the image of a celebrity, the spectators can only ever succeed at entrenching themselves in the same isolation and alienation they so desperately wish to overcome. In Debord’s own words: “Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived” (674). No wonder that, having become objectified in this way by the steady gaze of alienated spectators, the celebrities’ actual lives so often unravel, under, if the oxymoron can be pardoned, the burden of their own weightless simulacra. A case in point here is the downward trajectory of one of football’s most outstanding acts, the legendary Manchester United winger George Best. A Belfast-born prodigy, George “Bestie” Best starred for the Reds for ten years between 1963 and 1974, before the dark side of fame, namely alcoholism and depression, cut his

stellar career short. At one point in 1998, some fourteen years after his official retirement from the game, Best was so low as to become suicidal: “I’d had enough of people telling me what to do, to stay off the drink, to look after myself properly, to do this and that, so I decided that I would have one last month of doing all the things I loved and then just put an end to my life” (Best 377). George Best did not actually commit suicide, but died seven years later, aged 59, of multiple organ failure, his body utterly exhausted by years of hard-partying and booze.

Quite amazingly, in his 2003 book *After Theory*, Eagleton not only incorporates George Best into his anti-postmodernist argument in favour of traditional philosophical categories such as truth, virtue and objectivity; he also does so – even more astonishingly – with the aid of the most outrageous of stories about George Best, a story that has by now reached a semi-legendary status and become public currency. The standard version of the tale, retold for instance by the sports journalist Bobby McMahon in his 2012 article in *Forbes* magazine, but actually favoured and often told by the chief protagonist himself, holds that one day, already an ex-footballer, Best was enjoying himself in a five-star hotel room with caviar, champagne and a half-naked former Miss World on a bed covered with banknotes, when a hotel porter intruded upon the amorous scene, bringing in yet more expensive items and commenting on what he saw with the words: “George, where did it all go wrong?” Terry Eagleton picks up on the irony of the situation to put forth his ethical argument that in the given context, Best “was certainly enjoying himself [...] but he was not *flourishing*” (*After Theory* 114) and that “his life might have been happy in the sense of being opulent, contented and enjoyable, but it was not going anywhere” (*After Theory* 114). Cunningly, Eagleton then proceeds to deconstruct his own words by suggesting that life is not, after all, designed to be going anywhere in particular, that a certain purposelessness of action is inscribed into human nature, and that humans often tend to prosper, or indeed, flourish, when “allowed to do what we do just for the sake of it” (*After Theory* 115). It is while following this line of thought that Eagleton summons up his most positive evaluation of football to date. Contrasting George Best’s lavish ex-footballing lifestyle with his relatively short-lived footballing genius, he states the following:

How Best might genuinely have enjoyed himself would have been by carrying on playing football. It would not have been pleasant all the time, and there would no doubt have been times when he felt discontent; but it would have been how he could best thrive. Playing football would have been the moral thing to do. (*After Theory* 115)

To hear Eagleton praise football as the “moral thing to do” seems almost bizarre in light of his otherwise notoriously negative view of the game, but again – it would seem that by referencing George Best, he is targeting not so much the actual game of football, but rather its probably irreversible subsumption under the corporate framework. Seen from this angle, Best’s ability and determination to play football for the simple delight of it would have in fact challenged the corporate obsessions and fantasies that had long been parasitical on the game. It would, indeed, have been the moral thing to do.

Unfortunately, the repeated use of past participle structures in the above-quoted text is indicative of the hypothetical status of the argument. The reality, Eagleton realizes, is a lot bleaker, as becomes apparent when he writes the following:

Perhaps what helped to bring Best down was the fact that he was not able to play football just for its own sake. No footballer can, in a sports industry which is about shareholders rather than players, artistry or spectators. It would be like a hard-pressed commercial designer imagining that he could live like Michelangelo. . . . Best was no longer able to play just for the delight of it, and turned instead from delight to pleasure. His hedonism was just the other side of the instrumentalism he chafed at. (115)

It might be said in conclusion that Eagleton's overall view of football is deeply ambiguous. To date, he has predominantly taken a critical stance toward it, warning against its dehumanizing tendencies arising from its inscription into an increasingly corporatist, monetary and consumerist framework. He has, however, occasionally demonstrated a readiness to make room in his thought for football's liberating, and even moral, potential. To what extent these positive evaluations are mere rhetorical devices used by Eagleton to underscore his otherwise scathing critique of the game, or genuine, autonomous units providing for a more dialectical approach to the problem, remains an unsolved, and probably insoluble, conundrum. Nevertheless, the fact that a sweeping summarizing statement on Eagleton's attitude to football cannot possibly be made is quite symptomatic of football's ambiguous position in the public mind. Associated equally with artistry and philistinism, elevation of the spirit and drunken bigotry, football fits in well with the current corporatist framework and its many contradictions and fault lines. It is such fault lines that Eagleton opens up in his readers' awareness, making them question and question again the far-reaching implications of "one of the most popular, influential branches of the culture industry."

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# **Book Reviews**



**Tereza Topolovská**

***The Country House Revisited. Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst*  
Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017**

The introduction to *The Country House Revisited* opens, very appropriately, with a quotation from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945): "And suddenly a new and secret landscape opened before us." Topolovská's study is all about opening up a new landscape whose foundations rest on a communal paradigm: a sense of community that reflects "social, cultural, geographic or historical belonging" (159). The communal perspective is also reflected in the setting of the country house, which is either in the countryside, or at least where the countryside used to be. From this perspective, the country house is contrasted with the city. *The Country House Revisited* brings together the social institution of the country home and a variety of representations in literature of this very English institution.

The first part of the study (part one, introduction; and part two) provides an informative introduction to the history of the country house since 1900. This is followed, in part three, by a discussion of the country home from the perspective of an authentic dwelling as it is represented in literature, and more specifically, in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) and Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Part four, "Strangers' Children in the House: Post-millennial Echoes of the Post-war Poetics of the Country House," is the penultimate chapter and the most detailed section of the study. It discusses recent novels, including Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* (2009), Allan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2007), and Sadie Jones's *Uninvited Guests* (2012). The chapter focuses on the decline and transformation of the country house, drawing at the same time important parallels with earlier literary works.

Part four describes the sad fate of so many contemporary country houses, concluding that "they resemble ponderous prehistoric creatures trying to survive as stately homes declaring 'open house' or museums, or otherwise blend in in the form of either a hotel or boarding school" (156). The struggle for survival mirrors that of human beings, Topolovská concludes; the centre is elusive. The loss of the earlier glory of the country home constitutes not only a kind of loss but also a sense of homelessness, which is both personal and communal.

As Topolovská notes, no systematic theoretical study of the relationship between the country house and English literature has been carried out since Malcolm Kelsall's *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* (1993). *The Country House Revisited* thus fills an important gap.

For the alert reader there are special treasures to be discovered in the texts that form the subject of Topolovská's study; there is, as the study demonstrates, an intricate web of allusions, "ranging from Shakespeare to Edgar Allan Poe, from Henry James to E.M.Forster or Evelyn Waugh" (164). While the historical settings of the works discussed cover the period from 1910 to 2000, there are multiple time lines to be discovered even within a

single novel. The house is separate from the world around it and is not subject to the normal course of time. As houses have been transformed or become derelict, they provide what Topolovská describes as “a versatile vehicle for commentary on global, social, cultural, political and ecological matters” (165). It is clear that *The Country House Revisited* is not to have the last word on the decline of the country house: the fictional representation of the English country house will continue to attract the literary imagination. It is indeed, Topolovská argues, part of “the perpetual human fight for authentic existence” (15). As such, it provides a solid base from which to depart and return.

*The Country House Revisited* is a well-researched, compact study which nonetheless manages to cover a wide range of issues, from architectural history to national, social and personal identity. It also incorporates a variety of genres, from the pastoral to the gothic, the novel of manners and detective fiction. In addition, Topolovská makes excellent use of a range of internet sites, which include subjects as diverse as early twentieth-century poetry and interviews with contemporary authors. *The Country House Revisited* is a work of high scholarly achievement. It is eloquently written, richly supported by quotations from the various literary works, and fresh in its approach.

The stanza below, quoted in chapter four of *The Country House Revisited*, encapsulates the essence of Topolovská’s study:

Time past and time future  
Allow but a little consciousness.  
To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered (T. S.Eliot, “Burnt Norton”)

The country house is part of time past and time future, the real world and works of fiction. While *The Country House Revisited* will almost certainly not have the last word on the position of the country house in literature, it is certainly an excellent starting point!

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# **News, Announcements**



# Conference Report

## Multimodality – Towards a New Discipline

### THIRD BREMEN CONFERENCE ON MULTIMODALITY

Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Science

Bremen University, Germany

September 20-22, 2017

This conference was the third in a series of interdisciplinary and international symposiums focusing on recent developments and advances in multimodal research and related disciplines. While **BreMM14** was dedicated to closing the gaps between various multimodality-ready disciplines, and **BreMM15** concerned itself with theoretical and methodological exploration, the Third Bremen Conference, **BreMM17**, aimed to bring together a broad variety of viewpoints on multimodal communication – and, possibly, to pave the way for establishing multimodality as a multifaceted and at the same time self-sufficient and more clearly contoured discipline.

The idea of multimodality – both as a range of phenomena to be investigated and as a field of inquiry – was discussed by the three keynote speakers in the following order: **Kay O’Halloran** (Curtin University, Australia) with her talk *Multimodality: The Move to Big Data Analysis* exploring the possibilities of automated recognition of multimodal meanings in large data sets to cope with the sheer volume of data being generated today; **David Machin** (Örebro University, Sweden) with his talk *Multimodality as a Critical Research Approach* employing the study of multimodality to reveal how social practices become ideologically constructed or re-contextualized in ways that favor particular interests and forms of social relations; and **Ellen Fricke** (TU Chemnitz, Germany) with her talk *Language, Gestures and Images: Multimodality between Code Manifestation and Code Integration* showing how combining two lines of multimodality research – gesture-speech

relations in spoken language and language-image relations in written language – might open up promising new perspectives and research questions covering both these fields of investigation.

Another highlight of the conference was the panel discussion featuring the keynote speakers joined by **John A. Bateman** (Bremen University, Germany) and **Hartmut Stöckl** (University of Salzburg, Austria). Following the title of the conference – *Multimodality: Towards a New Discipline* – the discussion revolved around the converging tendencies across diverse disciplinary starting points, emerging in what could be called a ‘consensus view’ of multimodality which accentuates the necessity of examining the interplay of multiple modes and their use by communicators in specific contexts of production and reception. It was, however, agreed that despite the considerable insight and experience gained within and across a wide array of disciplines, questions connected with modes, modalities and their interaction are still answered in vague, programmatic or even impressionistic fashions. This obstacle in the path towards *a new discipline* is further accompanied by deficient empirical foundations caused by a lack of clarity in the central theoretical constructs employed and weaknesses in the available methodologies for analysis (cf. Stöckl, 2014). In order to arrive at more precise foundations, John Bateman and his colleagues suggest a revision of the Peircean semiotic framework that could, in the light of contemporary developments, guide our understanding of multimodality and do justice to its basic constructs; furthermore, it could also offer a stronger and more robust metatheoretical framework for addressing wider aspects of multimodality (cf. Bateman, Wildfeuer, Hiippala, 2017).

All in all, the conference provided a fertile ground for critical and stimulating insights into the state-of-the-art in multimodality from diverse fields, including the study of media, comics, cinema, video games, virtual reality, narrative, ethnography, as well as kinesics and haptic communication. This diversity has also yielded fresh perspectives on my own research results presented under the title *Towards a Multimodal Analysis of Memetic Communities on Facebook*, as part of a current SGS grant project. Indeed, the conference hosted more than 70 scholars of different backgrounds from all over the world, and thus it offered a space for formal as well as informal exchange and discussion of various ideas through different prisms in the nexus of multimodality, setting a course for further fruitful collaboration.

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Panelists, from the left: Kay O'Halloran, Hartmut Stöckl, John Bateman, David Machin and Ellen Fricke.

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