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# [ Legalistic and commitment-oriented corporate codes of ethics: distinctive macro-textual and lexico-syntactic traits ]

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**[Abstract]** *With its relatively recent major role in corporate discourse, the code of ethics is the expected privileged locus for a company to signal its ethical commitment to self-regulation. As underlined by Catenaccio and Garzone (2017), a legalistic approach seems to be distinguishable from a commitment-oriented approach. The present study sets out to investigate if distinctive traits of the two approaches are identifiable both at the macro-textual level and at the micro-textual (lexical and syntactic) level, and, if so, if they are influenced by the industry to which the company belongs. In order to do this, selected codes from eight distinct industries and from FTSE 100 companies are investigated within the theoretical framework of discourse analysis.*

**[Keywords]** *discourse analysis, corporate communication, codes of ethics*

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## [1] Contextual framework: business ethics and the adoption of codes

In the new, global economy, competition is intense and corporations need to match the way they do business with societal values and expectations if they are to survive. The ethics of the business community have frequently been under question, but a liberal, capitalistic-oriented economy can function only if the participants and the responsible players follow a certain set of ethical principles (Schnebel and Bienert 2004). Many corporations have faced strong and widespread criticism when they have failed to meet public expectations; they need legitimacy, and they need to be profitable. There are many reasons for the crisis of legitimacy, including inadequate corporate governance, a lack of sustainable corporate social responsibility, incompetent leadership, and widespread unethical practices. To restore public trust, corporations need to (re)align their values to what is perceived as the common good: this can be of more vital importance than their pure economic and financial performance in order to ensure corporate resilience and long-term survival.

Historically, code adoptions and revisions came as a response to major scandals: corruption, bribery, environmental incidents, or financial scandals. Codes were also a reaction to regulatory developments and pragmatic measures. Both types of these “exogenous shocks” (Greif and Laitin, 2004) threatened companies’ survival and triggered reflection upon corporations’ legitimacy on the part of both internal and external stakeholders. Corporate codes have come a long way to reach their present standardized form. They have evolved from simple moral concepts and rules developed to regulate business conduct in comparatively simple settings (cf. Cotrugli, 2018) into being a prominent part of the discourse of corporate responsibility and playing a crucial role in corporations’ process of legitimacy construction.

The term “business ethics” has been coined relatively recently, as business relations have become increasingly ethically challenging, leading to the emergence of a social movement to improve ethics in business conduct, which first came to prominence in the U.S. during the 1970s. Business ethics then established itself as a discrete field of study, and was accompanied by both an increase in literature and also a widespread adoption of corporate codes of ethics on the part of institutions.

A great deal of interest in codes of ethics exists in both the business community and the academic community, where this interest has given rise to a number of studies which have mainly focused on the content of various codes. Depending on the nature of the business, the codes cover a wide range of issues, such as labor relations, conflicts of interest, gifts, political contributions, confidential information, insider trading, human rights, consumer rights, or workplace health. Most codes also include procedures for periodic self-evaluation and investigation, and while some codes delineate business goals and ethical boundaries, others focus on corporate social responsibility.

The adoption of codes of ethics is a relatively recent phenomenon: although the first corporate codes appeared more than a century ago, in the U.S. 70% of them have been created since 1990 (Guillén, Melé, Murphy 2002), and the popularity of the codes has grown in the last three decades. It began as an essentially American practice, which slowly made its way to Europe via the subsidiaries of U.S. firms (Langlois and Schlegelmilch 1990, p. 524). While Europe lagged behind the U.S. in code adoption during the 1980s and 1990s (Kaptein and Wempe 1998), an in-

creasing number of European companies, trade organizations, (semi-)governmental organizations and professional associations began to develop codes of ethics from then on. In the 2000s, different surveys (e.g. KPMG 2008, Svensson, Wood, Singh and Callaghan 2009) reported a dramatic increase in code adoption, and the Harvard Law Review (2003) reported that 90% of Fortune 500 companies and approximately half of all the other companies had some type of code by the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today, most large companies, particularly in the U.S., regularly update their codes and frequently state that their codes are reviewed annually to remain relevant. Although it is true that there are regional differences – with 100% of code adopters in North America, the UK and Europe, and a much lower percentage in Asia (Chua 2015, p. 185) – a global trend is nevertheless detectable. One of the reasons for this trend is the fact that most multinational companies are listed on major U.S. and European exchanges, so they have to comply with the respective listing requirements. From this point of view, the code adoption rate may also be directly linked with a company's level of internationalization.

Many reasons behind the trend of adopting codes of ethics have been identified in academic literature (Kaptein 2011; Singh 2011; Winkler 2011). Together with a growing ethical consciousness, codes of ethics are seen in two very different ways: either as principles that companies truly seek to follow, or as a way to enhance corporate reputation and image among ethically aware consumers. Some previous studies on corporate codes of ethics have shown the strategic, self-interested rationale behind the adoption of a code on the part of corporations (e.g. Long and Driscoll 2008), while other researchers (e.g. Stevens 2009) have focused their attention on how code creation is mostly a managerial strategy aimed at restoring stakeholders' trust, or at least changing stakeholders' perception. This school of thought is skeptical of the rise of corporate codes, and tends to dismiss this trend as meaningless rhetoric (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990) or considers the trend a managerial control strategy due to companies' dependence on the securities markets for their financial resources. From this school's point of view, the codes' audiences cannot naively presume that the firms invoke codes for morally motivated reasons. The other school recognizes some value in such voluntarily given disclosures, and believes that managers' stance towards code adoption can reflect their sincere commitment to responsible, ethical behavior as an end in itself, not only merely as an instrumental practice. From this perspective, business ethics are evolving, and corporate ethical commitment is the result of the moral progress of a society which sees in ethical principles an asset of the highest importance for any type of business.

## [2] Literature review

A brief review of the relevant literature reveals that codes of ethics have been investigated mostly by researchers of non-linguistic disciplines, such as business ethics (e.g. Stevens 2009; Scott 2002), socio-psychology (e.g. Fairfax 2007), organization studies (e.g. Brown, Ainsworth, and Grant 2012), or management studies (e.g. Gillespie, Hurley, Dietz, and Bachmann, 2012). Even if lacking specific linguistic research tools, many of these researchers have recognized the critical role of language and text in the institutional process of legitimacy construction which is the aim of codes. Nevertheless, apart from studies by Farrell and Farrell (1998), Pollach (2003), Long and Driscoll (2008), Holder-Webb and Cohen (2012) and Chua (2015) – who have examined linguistic data from their non-linguistic perspectives – only a limited amount of specifically

linguistic research on the discursive role of codes has been carried out, with the exception of Catenaccio and Garzone (2017), whose work laid the foundations for the present paper and will be discussed later.

A great deal of research on codes has chosen content analysis as its method of inquiry, in order to provide rich information about which subjects are present or absent (Krippendorff 2013; Farrell and Cobbin 2000; Erwin 2011). Descriptive statistics provide summaries of the content of codes, underlining commonalities and differences. Some scholars have focused their attention on overlapping content (Holder-Webb and Cohen 2012), while others have identified thematic code categories (Chua 2015, p. 188). However, a deeper comprehension of codes that extends beyond content analysis is needed if we are to understand codes and how they work, as content analysis usually does not discern more subtle nuances in specific texts, but is rather aimed at gathering some thematic information to analyze the content of corporate codes with a variety of focal points (Bauer 2000). A more specific focus on codes' language seems necessary to unravel similarities – e.g. levels of language formality, text organization, and possible code typologies which may be identified beyond thematic patterns. The “legalistic” code type and the “commitment-oriented” code type which have been identified in the present study feature typical traits both at macro- and micro-textual levels, as will be explained in the following paragraphs. It might be worth mentioning here that professionals also distinguish between what they call “principle-based” codes and “rule-based” codes (KPMS 2008, p. 4). KPMG, a well-known consulting firm that has supported many national and international companies in the development, implementation and monitoring of their codes and compliance programs, recognizes that most codes contain a combination of the two types, and this point seems to be in line with the findings of the present study, as will be discussed in section 5 of this paper.

Finally, it needs to be underlined that research on corporate codes of ethics has also investigated other aspects besides code content. Prior studies have focused on perceptions of code users (Kaptein 2011), code quality (Erwin 2011), and physical appearance – e.g. length, eye-catching visuals, or format. For the purpose of the present study, it should be noted that these types of studies have analyzed corporate codes from different perspectives in a quite detailed way, and they have led the way for further – language-focused – research.

### **[3] Purpose of the study, methods and corpus**

#### **[3.1] Methodology and research questions**

Corporations are increasingly under public scrutiny and are subjected to intense external pressures to align their ethics to what is considered culturally and socially appropriate. At the same time, they are expected to pursue internal stakeholders' (e.g. employers', shareholders') interests and to be profitable. Therefore, companies need to construct their identity considering on the one hand societal, external stakeholders, and on the other hand internal stakeholders; codes of ethics are one of the key genres in corporate communication where this construction takes place.

This paper is based on the rationale that an investigation of the way in which a company's ethical commitment is textualized in codes may shed some light on possible exploitations of this corporate communication tool on the part of corporate writers. The study of codes is expected to be advanced by applying the theoretical framework of discourse analysis for observing

corporate reality. Top managers are invested with the task of promoting – and presenting – ethical decisions which may affect the value and viability of their companies. Discourse analysis is deemed to be likely to help explain the role of managerial discourse in the construction of one of the most important intangible assets of companies, i.e. their corporate identity.

Previous studies on corporate communication (Giglioni 2014) showed that discourse analysis proved to be adequate to reveal CEOs' and chairmen's apologetic strategies to convey a positive company image even at times of financial and economic crisis. From the same perspective, corporate discourse in codes of ethics will be analyzed to understand the way companies build their image. As has already been mentioned, on the one hand codes aim to inform their employees, managers, and trading partners about companies' ethical culture, while on the other hand they want to promote companies' (ethical) image externally. Therefore, codes' communicative intent is twofold, and from this point of view they can be assimilated to other genres of corporate communication such as annual company reports and press releases, which have been defined as hybrid genres (Bhatia 2004, p. 90; Fairclough 1992, p. 207) due to their dual communicative purpose. In the domain of corporate communication, the blurring of boundaries between discourses is especially prominent, and – as Jacobs (1999) suggests – this hybridization could be related to the general trend towards what Fairclough defines as the “commodification” of discourse, i.e. the tendency of promotional discourse to colonize other types of discourse, a phenomenon extensively investigated by Bhatia in his studies on genre mixing, bending, and embedding for the purposes of promotionalization (Bhatia 1997; 2002; 2004; 2012).

As has been mentioned above, Catenaccio and Garzone (2017) have focused their analysis of corporate codes on two clear approaches: the legalistic approach and the commitment-based approach. This distinction is partly drawn from Frankel (1989), who identified aspirational, educational and regulatory codes but focused his research on professional organizations. Catenaccio and Garzone's findings suggest that codes can be either framed as an aspect of compliance or as an issue of voluntary commitment, also in consideration of the section of the corporate website in which they are featured. Their classification – new in the field of linguistics but quite established among practitioners (e.g. Institute for Global Ethics, 2008, p. 2) – is combined with an analysis of modality, while it is the aim of the present study to identify other distinctive traits of legalistic and commitment-oriented codes at both macro- and micro-textual levels. Two research questions can thus be outlined:

RQ1) Can we identify typical traits of legalistic vs. commitment-oriented codes?

RQ2) Does one of the two types prevail in any specific industry?

### [3.2] Corpus description

In a previous part of this research on codes of ethics – which was presented in December 2018 at the CLAVIER (Corpus and Language Variation In English Research Group) conference in Milan – twenty codes were analyzed to carry out a comparison between the codes issued by the top ten investment banks and codes issued by ten non-financial FTSE 100 (Financial Times Stock Exchange Index) listed companies. The findings proved that pure legalistic codes are quite rare even in the financial industry, contrary to expectations – notwithstanding their prevalent presence in the governance section rather than in the CSR section of companies' websites (cf. Catenaccio and Garzone 2017).

With the purpose of assembling the corpus for the present study, seventeen more codes were retrieved prevalently from the Corporate Governance website section or, alternatively, from the CSR section. It must be noted that other sections are also becoming popular nowadays, together with their reader-friendly names – such as “About us” or “Who we are” sections. All the retrieved codes are stand-alone codes in booklets with an average length of 32 pages, although the number of pages can be a quite imprecise unit of measurement since other elements need to be taken into consideration to evaluate a code’s length (such as text layout and visuals). The format of a distinct, formal and self-contained document is meaningful since it gives the appearance of formalizing the behavioral standards of a particular organizational culture (Weaver, 1993). Code length will also be discussed later in this paper, as length was found to be a distinctive trait in the classification of codes.

The present study focuses on a corpus composed of seventeen corporate codes issued by companies listed in the FTSE 100 index from nine non-financial sectors: mining, media, food, tobacco, beverages, pharmaceuticals, aerospace & defense, oil & gas, and personal goods. According to the Industry Classification Benchmark (ICB), the sectors’ classification is organized within ten super-sectors, which have all been included here with the exception of the financial sector (which was already investigated in the previous part of the research). All codes collected are digitalized and easily accessible from their company website, making it simple to process them: the downloading process resulted in seventeen electronic documents. Although computing technology brings some advantages, such as speed, volume, and consistency (Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2002), for the purpose of the current study a mere automatic computer analysis was considered of limited use, and a critical reading was preferred in order to reveal implied meanings within texts, especially in terms of what is not stated.

If on the one hand the typology of the selected codes was expected to be influenced by the type of industry to which the company belongs, on the other hand it was problematic to predict which approach – legalistic or commitment-oriented – might have suited specific industries. Nowadays big corporations are necessarily impacted by the environment in which they operate – physical, cultural and societal – so ethical behavior is not only expected, but indeed required, and it is frequently regulated in every type of industry.

## **[4] Some typical traits of legalistic and commitment-oriented codes**

### **[4.1] Textual and linguistic traits of legalistic codes**

The list of legalistic traits was partially drawn from Candlin, Bhatia, and Jensen (2002) and from Garzone and Salvi (2007), and it is not intended to be exhaustive, although it is believed that it will allow interesting preliminary considerations. At a macro-textual level, when the following traits have been identified, the codes have been classified as legalistic: (short) code length, contract-style layout, predominance of lists, absence of visuals, of a CEO’s message and of comprehension aids (e.g. questions & answers sections, glossaries) – these last three being typical traits of commitment-oriented codes. Below are examples from, respectively, Burberry’s and Antofagasta’s codes. Due to space restrictions, the same examples will be referred to also when this paper’s attention shifts from the macro-textual level to the lexico-syntactic level.

[1] “Business Associates” refers to any individual, entity, business, company, partnership or any other body or group associated with Burberry including, without limitation, any such individual, entity, business, company, partnership or any other body or group supplying products, goods, raw materials, components, services, real estate or anything else, directly or indirectly, to any member of the Burberry Group or otherwise working directly or indirectly with or on behalf of any member of the Burberry Group. This also includes any person (an “Indirect Supplier”) providing products, goods, raw materials, components, services or anything else to (i) a direct supplier of Burberry or any other member of the Burberry Group or (ii) any other Indirect Supplier. “Burberry Associates” include, without limitation, the following: finished goods vendors; raw material and/or component suppliers; persons or entities which carry out any processing on any goods directly or indirectly supplied to Burberry; all production sites of any Business Associate; non-stock vendors; construction contractors (and their construction sites); franchisees; licensees; joint venture partners; consultants; contractors; wholesale customers; service providers; agents; landlords; any subcontractor of the above. “Modern Slavery” encompasses any slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour and human trafficking or analogous activity (Burberry, n.d.: 1-2).

Example 1 exemplifies the predominance of lists as a typical trait of legalistic codes. The first three lines of the first paragraph, and basically the entire second and third paragraphs, are made up by lists of nouns. All three paragraphs start with a definition introduced by verbs (i.e. “refer”, “include”, “encompass”), which can be classified here as semi-performative verbs as they define words and concepts for the purpose of the text (Gunnarsson 1984).

[2] Article 3

Without prejudice to what might be agreed in a Person’s employment contract, Antofagasta plc acknowledges and respects the right of the Persons to perform activities outside the Group, whether of a political, educational, religious, financial, commercial or other nature. However, such activities must be lawful and not prejudice, interfere or conflict with the fulfilment of their duties with the Group or with their employment contract.

The aforementioned activities must not, in any event, involve any actual or potential damage to or use of the name, credit, reputation, goods, trademarks, licences, industrial patents, relationships, confidential or inside information or other assets of the Group. Furthermore, these activities must not interfere with Persons’ work time or adversely affect the performance of all employment obligations. (Antofagasta 2016: 9).

The second example is intended to show the contract-style layout of the *Antofagasta Code of Ethics*, a code organized in thirty-three articles and presented as a document to be signed by “all Persons working in the Antofagasta Group.” Lists of nouns are also clearly identifiable in this example: a five-item and a ten-item list are embedded in sentences both in the first and in the second paragraph.

The last legalistic trait at a macro-textual level to be mentioned is the length of the codes. In the corpus under investigation, the average length of the codes which have been classified as legalistic is 13 pages, notably shorter than the average 32-page length of commitment-oriented codes. This is also due to the fact that no visuals are included, a detail which will be discussed later, as visuals play a crucial role and they aim at creating an effective response appealing to the emotional experience of readers.

At a micro-textual level, the above-illustrated examples also demonstrate (see the underlining) four out of the six distinctive syntactic and lexical traits which have been identified as legalistic: formal words (e.g. “analogous”, “aforementioned”), phraseological units (e.g. “without limitation”, “without prejudice”, “in any event”), attempts at extreme precision (e.g. “furthermore”), impersonal style which mostly implies the use of passive verb forms (e.g. “be agreed”), and third-person subjects (e.g. “the Group”). The last two traits which typify legalistic codes are the overuse of the modal verb “shall” and nominalization. *The Burberry Ethical Trading Code of Conduct* (n.d.) – where “shall” occurs thirty-seven times in seven pages – is the only clear example of the overuse of this modal verb, a typical verb in legal English. As will be discussed later, the frequency of “shall” was found to be high in a special type of code; all these codes qualify as legalistic and are targeted at executives.

### [3] WORKING CONDITIONS SHALL BE SAFE AND HYGIENIC

A safe and hygienic working environment shall be provided. Adequate steps shall be taken to prevent accidents and injury to health arising out of, associated with, or occurring in the course of work, by minimising, so far as is reasonably practical, the causes of hazards inherent in the working environment.

- I. As a minimum, building, including structural, fire and electrical safety standards must be compliant with local laws and regulations.
- II. Workers shall receive regular and recorded health and safety training provided by the Business Associate, and such training shall be repeated for new or reassigned workers.
- II. Access to clean toilet facilities and to safe drinking water, and, if appropriate, clean sanitary facilities for food storage shall be provided.
- IV. Accommodation, where provided, shall be clean, safe, and meet the basic needs of the workers.
- V. Each Business Associate observing the Ethical Trading Code of Conduct shall assign responsibility for health and safety to a senior management representative (Burberry, n.d.: 4).

Nominalization (underlined in example 4 below) is the last trait which needs to be mentioned, as it is a syntactic trait which occurs very frequently in legalistic codes.

- [4] The purpose of the Code of Ethics is to regulate our professional conduct in the following manner:
- Ensuring the ethical and professional behaviour of Persons.
  - Establishing relationships of trust, based on integrity, honesty and responsibility.
  - Contributing to a working environment that fosters healthy working relationships.
  - Improving the reputation of the Group by demonstrating of high standards of ethical behaviour.
  - Facilitating compliance with all legal require-

ments and internal policies and guidelines, ensuring respect for Human Rights.

- Preventing, detecting, and reporting all types of fraud, bribery and corruption.
- Contributing to the sustainability of the Group's businesses (Antofagasta, 2016: 6).

The above example was selected as it can be considered a very clear example of the presence and use of nominalization, and it is believed to be so also in consideration of its prominent position in the text, i.e. it is featured in the code's introduction. However, nominalization is a high-frequency trait in all the codes identified as legalistic in the corpus, with no exceptions.

To better understand the distribution of traits at a macro-textual level in the corpus under investigation, see Tables 1 and 2 (in the following paragraph), where the code length is trait number 3 (number of pages), while trait 4 (the CEO's message), trait 5 (visuals), and trait 6 (comprehension aids) are typical traits of commitment-oriented codes. Traits 4, 5 and 6 do not normally appear in legalistic codes, although there are a few exceptions. And vice versa: some legalistic traits may appear in codes which qualify as commitment-oriented codes.

To sum up the analysis conducted at a micro-textual level, it needs to be underlined that traits which identify legalistic codes have been detected as major traits in the following codes: AstraZeneca (short code, lists, nominalization), Antofagasta (contract-style layout, attempt at extreme precision, nominalization, third-person subjects – e.g. “the Group”), and Burberry (short code, contract-style layout, overuse of “shall”, nominalization, formal words, phraseological units, third-person subjects – e.g. “the Group”).

## **[4.2] Textual and linguistic traits of commitment-oriented codes**

At a macro-textual level, commitment-oriented codes – which are typically long documents – largely rely on four traits: visuals, *ad hoc* titles, comprehension aids, and CEOs' messages. The two last traits are meant to emphasize the dialogic and interpersonal component of the genre, a component which is likely to have a positive impact on the reception of the codes (Kaptein 2011).

The two grids below (Table 1 and 2) show the distribution and some details of the traits which helped to define commitment-oriented codes at a macro-textual level.

Company name	CocaCola	Diageo	Antofagasta	Anglo American	Tesco	Astra-Zeneca	Glaxo	BEA Systems	Rolls-Royce
Industry	Beverages	Beverages	Mining	Mining	Food	Pharma	Pharma	Aerospace & Defence	Aerospace & Defence
1. Website section	Corporate Governance	Corporate Governance	Corporate Governance	Sustainability	About us	Sustainability	About us	Our company	Sustainability
2. Ad Hoc title	Integrity. The essential ingredient.	No	No	Our Code of Conduct, our values in section	No	No	Living our values and expectations. Our code of conduct	Code of conduct. Doing the right thing	Our group policies: Enabling us to be at our best
3. Number of pages	41	48	26	36	32	6	25	66	35
4. CEO's Message	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Si
5. Visuals	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (drawings)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
6. Comprehension aids	Yes (flags, navigation bar)	Yes (Q/A)	No	Yes (always/never)	Yes (Q/A)	No	Yes (keywords to search for)	Yes (Q/A)	Yes (navigation bar, code short version)

[Table 1] Typical traits of commitment-oriented codes (macro-textual level)

Company name	BP	Shell	Informa	Pearson	Unilever	Burberry	BAT	Imperial Brands
Industry	Oil & Gas	Oil & Gas	Media	Media	Personal Goods	Personal Goods	Tabacco	Tabacco
1. Website section	Who we are	About us	Sustainability	Corporate	Who we are	CSR	Corporate Governance	Corporate Governance
2. Ad Hoc title	Our code. Our responsibility	Our code of conduct. Making the right decision	No	No	No	No	No	Stronger, better together. How you do it. Our code of conduct.
3. Number of pages	26	44	19	23	43	7	27	40
4. CEO's Message	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
5. Visuals	No	Yes	No	Yes (drawings)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
6. Comprehension aids	Yes	Yes	Yes (bullet points)	Yes (Q/A)	Yes (bullet points)	No	Yes ("who to talk to")	Yes (Q/A dos/don'ts)

[Table 2] Typical traits of commitment-oriented codes (macro-textual level)

Below are two examples of typical commitment-oriented traits, respectively from British Petroleum (visuals and CEO's letter, page 5), and Glaxo (visuals and *ad hoc* title, front page).

If attention is shifted to the micro-textual level, among the syntactic features which characterize commitment-oriented codes there are some worth highlighting as they are present in all codes which qualify as commitment-oriented: the prevalence of relatively short sentences and

Dear Colleague,

Welcome to BP's new Code of Conduct. This is our guide to doing the right thing in business. It is a must-read and a must-follow for all of us.

Nothing is more important to BP than making sure we do what is right – and nothing puts us at risk more than failure to do so.

You'll notice the Code is shorter and simpler, but no less vital. That's because we are focused on the most important principles and expectations rather than specifying detailed rules. I believe that BP people are fully capable of making the right decisions when faced with difficult choices and that they will be guided by their good judgement. But we should never feel that we must 'go it alone' when we are unsure of what is the right thing to do. One of the responsibilities we share is to seek guidance from our managers or other internal sources when we need it.

Please have the courage to speak up if you see anything that appears to breach this Code. Your concerns will be considered seriously – and BP will not tolerate retaliation against anyone.

Our values and behaviours are the foundation for our Code. They define how each of us must act to ensure that BP sustains its reputation and continues to earn the trust that allows us to prosper as a company. As you read this Code, be guided by its expectations and continue to live out our values in your work every day.

*Bob Dudley*

Bob Dudley  
Group Chief Executive

Dear Colleague Our responsibility

[5]

gsk do more feel better live longer

# Living our values and expectations

Our code of conduct

[6]

paratactic structures, and the widespread presence of active verb forms and first-person-plural personal pronouns (i.e. “we”). With reference to this last trait, it may be worth noting that there are only two codes (Unilever 2016 and Rolls-Royce 2018) in which third-person subjects (e.g. “the Company”) are also employed quite frequently. Example 8 below aims to illustrate some of the above-mentioned typical traits of commitment-oriented codes at a micro-textual level. In fact, in the Coca-Cola code these traits appear from the very beginning of the text – the table of contents (see example 8 below) – and the code also includes a type of comprehension aid at the very top of the page, as well as figurative language (i.e. the section titles “The Last Drop” and “A Fountain of Information”), which is a clear choice from the very title: *Integrity. The essential ingredient. Code of Business Conduct* (Coca-Cola 2018). Apparently, a real effect on the audience can be achieved via persuasion rather than by the imposition of will through rules and regulations, and persuasion depends heavily on the force of emotional appeal. Therefore, the use of figurative language as well as of first-person pronouns – which emphasize the recipients’ participation in a larger community – needs to be considered in this perspective.

◀ Table of Contents Be Aware Protect What is Ours Demonstrate Accountability Deal Fairly with Others Care for Our Communities A Fountain of Information ▶

[8]

## Table of Contents

<b>3</b>	<b>Be Aware</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>Deal Fairly with Others</b>
4	Why We Have a Code	27	We Compete Fairly
5	Who Is Covered Under the Code	28	We Comply with Trade Compliance Laws
6	What You Need to Do	29	We Do Not Tolerate Bribery
7	How to Make Good Decisions	30	We Do Not Trade on Inside Information
8	Your Local Ethics Officer	31	We Follow Privacy Laws
9	Reporting Concerns	<b>32</b>	<b>Care for Our Communities</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Protect What is Ours</b>	33	We Respect Human Rights
12	We Protect Non-Public Information	35	We Show That We Care
13	We Safeguard Company Assets	<b>38</b>	<b>The Last Drop</b>
15	We Maintain Accurate Records	<b>39</b>	<b>A Fountain of Information</b>
16	We Prevent Money Laundering	40	Glossary
<b>17</b>	<b>Demonstrate Accountability</b>	41	Resources
18	We Avoid Conflicts of Interest		
22	We Are Responsible with Gifts, Meals and Entertainment		
25	We Build Transparent Relationships		

Differently from legalistic codes, the lexicon and syntax of most commitment-oriented codes tend to be simple and clear. If legal terms or concepts are used, they are often accompanied by explanatory parts and are likely to be clarified throughout the text. Being and looking comprehensible seems to be the goal of this type of code, and this goal is pursued through discursive and textual choices both at macro- and micro-textual levels.

## [5] Research findings

Some traits of what can at this point be defined as two prototypical code types have been identified both at macro- and micro-textual levels. The concept of prototype used here is taken from Swales's definition of genre and implies the fact that certain features would "identify the extent to which an exemplar is prototypical" (Swales 1990: 52). Legalistic codes are short and are characterized by a predominance of lists, a contract-style layout, and an absence of visuals, of the CEO's message and of comprehension aids, while at micro-textual level they may feature formal words, phraseological units, attempts at extreme precision, overuse of "shall", nominalization and impersonal style (i.e. a prevalence of third-person subjects and passive verb forms). At the same time, typical textual and linguistic traits of commitment-oriented codes can also be identified. Codes of this type are long documents and largely resort to visuals, *ad hoc* titles, comprehension aids, and CEOs' messages. At a micro-textual level, commitment-oriented codes may use figurative language, and they typically opt for a more personal style, i.e. the use of first-person plural pronouns and active verb forms. Not all the traits need to be present to classify a code as either legalistic or commitment-oriented, but one of them is always avoided in legalistic codes, i.e. visuals (e.g. pictures, maps, diagrams), an even more meaningful fact if we consider that the web-mediated environment is quite visual (Salvi 2016, p. 388) and codes are mainly accessed via companies' websites. Vice versa, only two out of the fourteen identified commitment-oriented codes do not make recourse to visuals (i.e. British Petroleum and Rolls Royce). However, these both feature the CEO's message and comprehension aids, and they are long codes, thus largely complying with the commitment-oriented type.

The research seems to suggest that pure legalistic codes are nowadays rare in corporate communication, regardless of the industry to which the company belongs. In the seventeen-code corpus selected for the present paper, only one code could be defined as purely legalistic: *The Burberry Ethical Trading Code of Conduct* (n.d.). The other two codes which may be classified as legalistic – due to the prevalence of legalistic traits both on macro- and micro-textual levels – are AstraZeneca's and Antofagasta's codes. However, although Antofagasta's contract-style code uses legal jargon and an extremely limited number of pictures and does not use comprehension aids at all, the CEO's message is present, and it opens a long, twenty-six-page document. AstraZeneca's code features no CEO's message, no comprehension aids and no visuals, and it is a short, seven-page document crammed with bullet-point lists (about 70% of the text), thus complying with the legalistic prototype. However, other legalistic traits such as formal words, phraseological units and passive verb forms are avoided. In fact, the most striking feature of the bulleted outline of AstraZeneca's code is its prevalent use of the active voice in the present tense with first person plural subjects, an eminently non-legalistic feature.

Differently from what was habitual in the 1980s, when codes were used to mitigate the undesirable consequences of scandals at the time and tended to be legalistic (Benson 1989, p. 308),

pure legalistic codes nowadays seem to be quite uncommon, and a hybrid form of code has replaced them. As far as it concerns the corpus under investigation in the present study, this fact is not related to the business sector, i.e. none of the two code types prevails in any specific industry.

For completeness of information, it needs to be added that there is a niche where pure legalistic codes prevail; this niche is made up by codes specifically targeted at either financial officers or senior officers. Documents of this type – if present – are separate documents which are usually more difficult to retrieve from companies' websites and are frequently introduced by an explanatory note. They typically feature passive verb forms, overuse of "shall", third-person subjects, formal words, phraseological units, attempts at extreme precision, and nominalization. At the same time, visuals, comprehension aids and CEOs' messages never appear. In the corpus selected for the already-mentioned first part of the research (cf. section 3.2), 30% of the banks analyzed and 20% of the non-financial companies analyzed had dedicated codes for executives. These percentages are in line with the percentages in the corpus under consideration for the present study, where three out of seventeen companies have a dedicated code for executives: Diageo (food & beverages), Shell (oil & gas), and BAT (consumer goods). This sub-group of legalistic codes is particularly meaningful in relation to the second research question outlined in the paper, because it highlights the fact that the presence of a dedicated code for top management is likewise not related to the business sector.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to state that the genre plays a key role in fostering an ethical culture, in setting a company's ethical climate and communicating it both internally and externally, and this fact appears not to be related to the type of industry. It is a largely shared opinion among scholars and practitioners that codes should attempt to state the major philosophical principles and articulate the values embraced by corporations, rather than merely reacting to current legislative pressure towards corporate responsibility. This opinion may partially explain the relatively recent widespread presence of commitment-oriented corporate codes of ethics, also in consideration of the productive academia/practice interface in the field of corporate communication.

To better understand the prevalence of commitment-oriented codes highlighted in this study, another element should be considered: the majority of codes are texts which are similar both in terms of content and language in its very broad sense, i.e. including visuals. In 2011 Farrell et al. employed textual analysis to explore the extent of language commonality and found a significant percentage of sentence matching in the corpus they selected for their analysis. Therefore, the prevalence of a code type can also be considered as the result of a mimetic process, as code drafters are strongly influenced by pre-existing codes. On a theoretical level, the seminal work by René Girard (1978) on human behavior as essentially mimetic is deemed to have led the way to more recent studies on the so-called "cut and paste society" (Holder-Webb and Cohen, 2012). On the practitioners' side, manuals and ready-to-use online resources – such as the popular nine-step model created by the Institute of Business Ethics for developing effective codes – seem to foster ethics consumerism, and even if codes can be conceived as safeguards against the erosion of business ethics (Galavielle, 2004) and if their goal is bold, the tendency to isomorphism may bring into question companies' sincere ethical commitment to re-legitimize the business world.

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and culture ]**



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# [ “Exceptionally Feeble”? The Role of Circumcision in Arthur Koestler’s *Thieves in the Night* ]

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**[Abstract]** *This article analyzes the role of the protagonist’s circumcision, and its discovery by a Fascist woman, in the plot of Thieves in the Night, Arthur Koestler’s fourth novel. While the scene has been criticized for its lack of realism, as well as its lack of “seriousness”, it is argued here that it is realistic both from a historical and from a literary point of view, and it is an incident dramatic enough from a psychological perspective to motivate the protagonist’s radical decision to start a new life on a kibbutz in Mandate Palestine.*

**[Keywords]** *Arthur Koestler, realism, circumcision, trauma, 1930s, Jewish closet, novel*

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This paper focuses on a specific scene from Arthur Koestler’s *Thieves in the Night*, the author’s fourth novel published in his lifetime, and the second one he wrote entirely in English. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Klawitter; Vernyik, “He Is Not English”; Vernyik, “Straight Out”), at least as far as texts published in English are concerned, little attention has been paid to Koestler’s fiction beyond *Darkness at Noon* since Mark Levene’s monograph published in 1984. The present paper, by drawing attention to a short yet crucial scene from this admittedly controversial novel, hopes to contribute to a revitalization of academic debate on the author’s lesser-known, or more easily forgotten, fiction.<sup>1</sup>

A large number of texts discussing *Thieves in the Night*, whether they consider the novel a literary success or a failure, find fault with the portrayal of Joseph’s, the protagonist’s, sexual encounter with a young, anti-Semitic British woman. While this episode plays a crucial role in organizing and driving the plot, as those very texts themselves admit, they tend to consider it insufficient to cause the radical change it leads to, and motivates, in the novel, and they also find it an unlikely event. They variously categorize it as “exceptionally feeble” (Scammell 281), a “misconceived episode” (Levene 103), an “unnecessary event” (Fyvel 14), “a ludicrous love-adventure [...] both absurd and unlikely” (Quenell), or an example of Koestler’s “unpleasant old obsession with the physical details of sex”, which, in the present instance, is only leading to an “esthetic imbalance” (Brady 244). In other words, these critics consider the scene unfit for the central role it plays in the plot of the novel either because they doubt that a marred sexual encounter can have consequences dramatic enough to lead to a radical change in the protagonist’s life, or because they consider such a scene unlikely or even impossible, “betray[ing] Koestler’s ideal of realism” (Scammell 281).

The aim of the present article is to show that this disputed event, the discovery of Joseph’s circumcision by his anti-Semitic lover, is neither unrealistic in the late 1930s in Great Britain, nor lacking the necessary psychological weight to make Joseph rediscover his roots and join the Zionist settlers in Palestine. As will be shown, the scene has a complex and ambiguous symbolism with momentous psychological consequences bordering on the traumatic. This is why it can play such a crucial role in influencing Joseph’s behavior and the direction of the plot. Further, this paper points out that the novel’s strategy of organizing its plot around this event (and its consequences) might have been used by the author in order to reveal a common psychological feature shared by other Jewish men living in the diaspora during the first half of the twentieth century.

The scene in question, which recounts Joseph’s (the protagonist’s) first sexual experience back in the United Kingdom, is described in the following manner:

He had known Lily for almost two years, was humbly in love with her, had talked to her poetry, sex and eternity, and had never kissed her lips. After the ball, without transition, he became the lover for a wildly unreal and elusive hour, of a woman so completely transformed that he kept stammering her name aloud to convince himself of her identity. Then came the awakening and the crash. Even now, years later, he grew hot with humiliation as he thought of it. In her dark room she had switched the bedside lamp on to look for a cigarette. The sudden light had revealed their nudity, and with it the sign of the Covenant on his body, the stigma of the race incised into his flesh. The horror in her face made him at first think that she had discovered in him the symptoms of some repulsive disease; then, in a voice icy with contempt she had accused him of infamy

and deception, cross-examined him about his ancestry; ordered him to get dressed and clear out of her room. At last the reason dawned on him. (Koestler, *Thieves* 76)

Lily's behavior is further explained in the novel by her characterization (a page earlier) as follows: “She was generally liked among the neighbours, and sometimes teased by them on account of her enthusiasm for a new political movement which organised demonstrations through the London East End, and whose members wore black shirts and had fights with policemen” (75).

It is clear from the description that Lily was a member of one of Britain's fascist parties: “the small but well-connected British Fascists (BF) [...] the short-lived National Fascisti (NF) and the virulently racist Imperial Fascist League (IFL)” (Worley 71), or perhaps even more likely, the British Union of Fascists, or depending on the exact time of the event, its predecessor, the New Party. Although the name of this party, just like that of the other parties, suggests an Italian Fascist rather than Nazi affiliation, the situation was not so simple: “as one astute observer noted in 1932, the BUF emerged as ‘Mussolini in policy and Hitlerite in organisation’, albeit enveloped in the patriotic wrap of the Union Jack” (Young qtd. in Worley 82). “New Party members visited the Munich *Braun Haus*” (Worley 82), and “while the BUF was launched bearing the insignia of Italian Fascism (the fasces) and with black-shirted uniforms at the ready” (82), its youth movement in particular reminds one both of what is described in the novel and the Nazi model in Germany:

By November [1931], the party's youth organization had been reconstituted as Nupa, a self-proclaimed ‘shock movement’ of ‘vibrant nationalism’ that [Sir Oswald] Mosley admitted to [Harold] Nicolson would ‘correspond to the [...] Schutzstaffel organization of the Nazis.’ Indeed, Nupa formed the basis of the New Movement, with members housed in barracks and committed to confronting communists in the battle to control Britain's streets. (Nicolson and Young qtd. in Worley 78)

In fact, Mark Levene also finds it likely that of all potential Fascist groups, Lily “supports Mosley's Fascists” (103–104). Thus, one can justifiably hypothesize that since Lily must have been a member of this particular British extreme-right movement, modeled to a large extent on those in Italy and Germany, she could have easily held anti-Semitic and possibly Nazi beliefs, and so what led to her revulsion and radical reaction was Joseph's Jewish ancestry.

The first ground on which both contemporary reviewers and later commentators refuse to acknowledge this scene as realistic is the existence of the practice of circumcision amongst the non-Jewish population of the United Kingdom. Michael Scammell emphasizes that “circumcision was common in Britain for hygienic reasons” (281), Mark Levene reminds the reader that “circumcision was a hygienic as well as a religious practice in England” (104), John Atkins claims “circumcision is by no means peculiar to the Jews” (84), while Charles A. Brady notes that “surely modern surgery's having borrowed this particular item of Mosaic wisdom as a therapeutic commonplace for new-born males has gone far towards nullifying this Pauline difference” (244).

The situation, however, is more complex than they suggest. It is true that by the end of the nineteenth century, circumcision was advocated and practiced by a large number of physicians in Great Britain, a conviction whose origins could be traced back to the middle of the same century (Glick 156). Yet the phenomenon had a distinctly class-related feature, based on British experiences at the colonies:

British administrators and medical officers generally considered Muslims cleaner and more sophisticated than Hindus. Muslim circumcision probably contributed to that image. Moreover, as the social historian Ronald Hyam notes, British men stationed in India contracted venereal diseases in disturbing numbers, and some physicians, convinced that the tropical climate encouraged infectious growths beneath the foreskin, urged that upper-class English boys – future members of the overseas ruling elite – be circumcised to avoid trouble later. Physicians at home followed this advice. British circumcision, says Hyam, was “an imperial phenomenon,” performed mainly on infants of the “upper and professional classes.” By the 1930s a high percentage of upper-class boys – but only about 10 percent of working-class boys – were being circumcised. (157)

This was probably also linked to the fact that the medicalization of childbirth also took place during the same period, pushing out home birth with midwives and drawing more and more women to hospitals during childbirth. “Since midwives rarely performed circumcisions, for Gentiles having one’s foreskin removed became a sign of having been delivered by a physician. Doctors suggested it to parents immediately after the birth of a son. Circumcision, they professed, was based on state-of-the-art medical knowledge” (Gollaher 107). This, of course, was also not unrelated to one’s social standing. As David Gollaher explains, “[m]edical circumcision [...] assumed a special role in the fin-de-siècle search for rank and social order. It signified precisely that aversion to dirt – and not just dirt, but vulgarity, nasty habits, and diseases – that symbolically set one on a higher plane” (107). This can be considered the reason why the practice was very common amongst the upper classes and those with an explicit desire to join their ranks, and rather uncommon among lower-class citizens.

In other words, Lily’s reaction to Joseph’s circumcised penis also depends on Joseph’s and Lily’s social background. The scene only truly “betrayed Koestler’s ideal of realism” (Scammell 281) if Lily belongs to the upper classes (as this would inform her knowledge of the use of the practice in Britain), and, at the same time, her pre-shock mental image of Joseph’s social standing is also of the upper class (i.e. she can reasonably expect him to have undergone these practices for that reason). If she is upper-class and Joseph is not, she would have no reason to suppose that he would have had his penis circumcised, and if she is lower-class and Joseph is upper-class, she would not know about the practice among the upper classes.

The novel does not describe Lily’s background in much detail, but one can try to extrapolate from the little information there is. Lily’s party is described as one that “organised demonstrations through the London East End, and whose members wore black shirts and had fights with policemen” (Koestler, *Thieves* 75), and while this certainly applies to the BUF in general, it also calls to mind the Battle of Cable Street in particular. This is important, as this could potentially position Lily as a member of the middle class. Discussing the traditional view of both the BUF and the Battle of Cable Street, David Renton asserts: “The class model of Cable Street rests on three pillars, first, the idea that British fascism was a middle-class force, second, that anti-fascism was an authentic working-class response to it, and third, that the decisive outcome of the Battle of Cable Street was fascist defeat” (97). Yet, as he proves, the situation was more complex: “The BUF’s membership was made up of a diverse and heterogenous collection of individuals” (100). Rather than being just a movement of the capitalist middle class, “fascism was a mass movement, capable of winning significant numbers of workers to its side” (101), although certainly “with a middle-class core” (100), probably fitting the lower middle class best with its

ideology: “there was an overlap between the social position of the 1930s petty bourgeois, trapped between capital and labour, and the social ideology of fascism, which claimed to stand as a revolutionary alternative to both” (100), and which explains rather well why this class ended up “providing a disproportionate share of the Fascist party’s membership” (100). In other words, British fascism was a mass movement, encompassing all classes, but with the lower middle class being its core and its most numerous group. Thus, as far as her party affiliation is considered, although Lily could be a member of any class, it is most likely that she is a member of the lower middle class.

Another relevant piece of information divulged about Lily is that she is divorced (Koestler, *Thieves* 75). This might also help in locating her socially. As David V. Glass explains, although “prior to 1850 [...] divorce was [...] evidently reserved for the very rich, since the cost was prohibitive for the ordinary person” (288), this eased somewhat in 1857, due to the fact that the “1857 [Matrimonial Causes] Act transferred jurisdiction in matrimonial cases from the spiritual courts to a new ‘Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes’ in London” (289), thereby eliminating the need to go through, and finance, a very complicated procedure involving several different authorities. This process was continued by “the 1920 Administration of Justice Act [which] made divorce cheaper and therefore easier by giving assizes the same powers [...] as were possessed by the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division of the High Court” (291). Yet, although “by 1914 divorce had established itself as a social phenomenon” (293), it was still “one restricted to a definite monetary class. The cost of divorce made this method of ending marriage quite impossible for any but the very wealthy” (293). More specifically, “the procedural reforms of 1857 reduced the costs of an undefended divorce from a minimum figure of between £ 700 and £ 800 in the 1850s to between £ 40 and £ 50 in the 1900s and between £ 50 and £ 70 in the depreciated currency of the 1940s” (Rowntree and Carrier 192–193). As Glass points out, however, there was a way to lower these costs significantly, if one qualified as a poor person:

Poor Persons’ Procedure [...] was initiated in June 1914, in a set of Rules of Court administered by a Government department, under what is now known as the Administration of Justice Act. In 1926, the administration was transferred to the London Law Society and about ninety provincial Law Societies. The significance of this Procedure lies in the fact that it has introduced a considerable working-class element to the Divorce Courts, [...] because a “Poor Person” can generally obtain a divorce for between £ 2 and £ 3. (291)

This led to a radical change to the extent that, for example, “In 1917, ’18, ’19, ’20, and ’21, they [i.e. people of low income] constituted 22.6, 33.1, 35.6, 39.2, and 37.4 per cent. respectively” (295) of all divorces. Likewise, in the 1930s, the percentage of divorce proceedings with financial support from the state was between 34.7% and 42% (Rowntree and Carrier 201). In other words, by the time of Lily’s divorce, a divorce procedure was accessible even for members of the working class, and much more so for someone with a middle-class background. Nor would divorced women have faced insurmountable problems supporting themselves after the divorce:

In fact, where the Victorian middle-class wife could see only the prospect of relative or complete destitution as an alternative to her unhappy marriage, her twentieth century counterpart, armed with more vocational skill and initiative, could, except in times of very heavy unemployment, contemplate the financial implications of separation and divorce with relative equanimity. (197)

Thus, the fact that Lily is a divorcée does not in any sense exclude the possibility of her coming from a lower middle-class background.

A further piece of information that is possible to find out about Lily is the fact that she plays tennis: Joseph, “during the summer vacation after his second term fell in love with a woman from the neighbourhood whom he met at a local tennis tournament”<sup>2</sup> (Koestler, *Thieves* 75). As a sport, tennis is rather easily identified with wealth and exclusivity: “the image of posh tennis has lingered on, together with the suggestion [of] snobbishness within private clubs and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA)” (Kay 2534), with “the maintenance of social exclusivity” (2534) by clubs, with “afternoon teas” (2544), garden parties and the clubs essentially serving as a “marriage bureau” (2544). And such a view is far from surprising, as tennis enjoyed “a strong aristocratic following” in its early years (Lake 878), with “the sport’s original players, administrators and club patrons [coming] from the landed classes” (878), while people from the upper middle classes also envisioned it as “a sport played partly for social prestige” (878). Yet, as Robert J. Lake explains, “[t]he upper classes soon dropped the sport, except in their patronage of clubs and associations, in the light of increasing middle-class participation” (878), and what is more, “post-war [i.e. WWI] economic prosperity and the falling relative price of tennis equipment helped to break down some of the hitherto prevailing class barriers and release lawn tennis from elitist dominance” (884), with a large number of new associations formed in the 1920s, most of which “allowed access to children, members of the lower-middle classes, and other previously marginalised social groups” (885). In fact, the accessibility of tennis by the 1920s was even wider than this suggests: as Joyce Kay explains, most histories of tennis focus exclusively on clubs that were members of the Lawn Tennis Association, thanks to the easy availability of detailed data, and thus “[i]nsufficient attention has been paid to the amount of tennis taking place either in less formal settings such as public parks, or in clubs that chose not to affiliate” (2535), although the number of these clubs and associations was considerable. For example, “Andy Lusic, the historian of Nottinghamshire tennis, [...] calculated that less than 20% of the clubs were affiliated to the county LTA in 1928” (2535). While the fact that Joseph and Lily “met at a local tennis tournament” (Koestler, *Thieves* 75) might seem to suggest that theirs was not such a club, even this could be a misconception: “there were many competitive leagues outside the LTA structure in ‘works’ sports associations, public parks and churches, and evidence from a sample of unaffiliated clubs shows that they were not necessarily small, short-lived or of little consequence” (Kay 2536). In other words, the fact that the two of them met at a tennis competition is also compatible with the theory that Lily is most probably of lower middle-class origin.

Joseph, on the other hand, is clearly from more of an aristocratic social background, albeit from the lower ranks of the nobility:

His father had been a Russian-Jewish pianist of some renown. His mother was English and a gentile. Her people had never approved of her marriage. After her husband’s death she went back to live with them in their house in Oxfordshire. Joseph was an only child; he grew up in the large country house, played cricket and tennis, went to church, rode a pony and later a horse. [...] In due course he was sent up to Oxford. (Koestler, *Thieves* 75)

The fact that the family did not approve of the marriage points to them being members of the upper class: after all, Joseph’s mother can be considered to have married down, having chosen a pianist, however well-known. The family owning a large country house and Joseph having

a pony and later a horse all point at his roots on the mother’s side being among those with land, that is, the landed gentry (the above description shows rather too limited possessions for the family to be peers). Such a reading is also supported by V. S. Pritchett, who clearly describes Joseph along these lines: “he belongs to that romantic idol of the Continent, the English country gentry. It is the Disraeli touch” (91). In terms of textual evidence, Joseph belonging to the gentry is further supported by a scene in the novel during which members of the kibbutz of Ezra’s Tower discuss the behavior of the assistant chief commissioner’s wife:

“What did you think of our guests?” [Reuben] asked. “That female walked about the camp as if she were inspecting a zoo.”

“She was the typical English aristocrat,” said Dasha, who was a fervent socialist and had never spoken to a live Englishman.

“Aristocrat my foot,” said Joseph. “She is what they call at home the lower middle class, and what in the colonies becomes the ruling class. It is a kind of Pygmalion-miracle which is automatically performed each time a P. & O. liner passes Gibraltar. The whole Empire is a kind of glorified suburbia.” (Koestler, *Thieves* 56)

Joseph’s comment reveals not only his familiarity, but potentially also his self-positioning above her on the social ladder. To quote Pritchett again: “A naïve snobbery is disclosed here. [...] The consequence is that when this character goes to Palestine, he has a low social opinion of the British ruling class who do not come out of the top drawer. One lady [and one can reasonably suppose this lady to be the one discussed in the quote above] – imagine it – has an official position and yet is only the daughter of a sergeant” (91).

This, of course, means that, Jewish father or not, Joseph would have been circumcised in any case, and his circumcision, indeed, need not have been for religious reasons. That being said, it is doubtful whether a woman from the lower middle class would have any knowledge of the practice being widespread amongst the upper classes. Being a member or supporter of the British Union of Fascists, and holding anti-Semitic views, she would, however, certainly have been aware of the Jewish religious practice.<sup>3</sup> After all, it is *her* interpretation of the circumcised penis that dominates the scene: “The horror in her face made him at first think that she had discovered in him the symptoms of some repulsive disease; then, in a voice icy with contempt she had accused him of infamy and deception, cross-examined him about his ancestry; ordered him to get dressed and clear out of her room” (Koestler, *Thieves* 76). There was no opportunity for Joseph to explain, reflect or debate. And even had there been, it is not at all sure if Joseph himself would have been aware of others in his class, of gentile origin, having undergone the same surgical procedure. Thus, Lily understanding Joseph’s bodily modification as a result of him being Jewish, and Joseph realizing that his father indeed *was* Jewish, is a theory that he is likely to accept even if the circumcision in its actuality had happened, unbeknown to him, as a result of the wishes of his gentile mother’s family. Such a reading is, in fact, also supported by the text itself: at first, Joseph has no idea why Lily behaves the way she does. He thinks she sees “the symptoms of some repulsive disease” (76) at first, and only at long last, after Lily’s questions and remarks, does it dawn on him that this may be a result of his Jewishness. Until then, it was, for him, just how a penis looks.

Having shown that (taking into consideration what little the text says about Lily’s and Joseph’s social backgrounds) the scene and its interpretation by Joseph is both possible and probable, it still remains to be discussed what relationship this has to Koestler’s understanding

of realism, and indeed to the concept of realism in general. Only in this way can it be established if the scene indeed “betrayed Koestler’s ideal of realism” (Scammell 281). In “The Future of the Novel”, Koestler defines realism as follows:

Realism in fiction is the striving to approach the reality of the human condition with as open a mind and as much disregard for convention, prejudice and habit as one’s capacities permit. It means discarding traditions which mask vital bands in the human spectrum, and taking in new extensions of the visible range offered by psychology, the social sciences, the evolution of language. (98)

In portraying the scene when Lily discovers Joseph’s circumcision, her abrupt break-up with him, and her interpretation of his circumcision as a sign of Joseph’s Jewishness, Koestler can be easily argued to be doing exactly what he claims the duty of realism is: “to approach the reality of the human condition with as open a mind and as much disregard for convention, prejudice and habit as one’s capacities permit” (98). More specifically, in dealing with an explicitly sexual scene in a non-erotic fashion, and discussing the anxiety and crisis of identity it can lead to, he certainly seems to be “discarding traditions which mask vital bands in the human spectrum” (98). The only sense in which the scene might seem to be imperfect according to Koestler’s own conception of realism can be found in his discussion of the portrayal of sexuality in the contemporary novel:

In the average Victorian novel, the whole range of sex was represented by a gap in the spectrum. To-day, a number of its aspects are admitted; but it would be naïve to believe that these suffice to cover even the most recurrent unmentionable thoughts and emotions of real people. A writer may take his courage into both hands and allude to some of them; yet he won’t be able to do it with grace and ease. The passage will hit the reader in the eye, and the author will feel that he is handling a hammer. The novel will not be able to digest the full implications of Freud for perhaps another half-century. Art is not yet ripe to represent the most fundamental act of reality, procreation; even a Hemingway fails when he tries it. (99)

If one understands the scene to be a representation of procreation, then indeed, it goes against Koestler’s very own understanding of what literary fiction is able to achieve without destroying the “grace and ease” (99) of narration, as in Koestler’s understanding, “[a]rt is not yet ripe to represent” (99) it. But, given the fact that the aim of the scene is clearly *not* to represent “the most recurrent unmentionable thoughts and emotions” (99), or in other words, to portray anything erotic or even sexual, this should not apply. As far as the act itself is concerned, the novel does not go beyond what could be considered “a gap in the spectrum” (99) or at most an allusion to what happens: “After the ball, without transition, he became the lover for a wildly unreal and elusive hour, of a woman so completely transformed that he kept stammering her name aloud to convince himself of her identity” (Koestler, *Thieves* 76). That is all there is about the sex. The rest is about shock, surprise, disgust, shame, recognition, and one easily could continue the list, but there is nothing erotic or sexual:

Then came the awakening and the crash. Even now, years later, he grew hot with humiliation as he thought of it. In her dark room she had switched the bedside lamp on to look for a cigarette. The sudden light had revealed their nudity, and with it the sign of the Covenant on his body, the stigma of the race incised into his flesh. The horror in her face made him at first think that she had discovered in him the symptoms of some

repulsive disease; then, in a voice icy with contempt she had accused him of infamy and deception, cross-examined him about his ancestry; ordered him to get dressed and clear out of her room. (76)

In short, there is no reason to consider this an example of Koestler’s category of a “passage [which] will hit the reader in the eye” (“The Future of the Novel” 99).

Moving beyond Koestler’s personal understanding of realism and engaging with classic theories of realism in general,<sup>4</sup> the situation remains very nearly the same: the novel’s inclusion of the scene is not incompatible with the novel being a realist novel. René Wellek makes the following claims about realism:

realism is the “objective representation of contemporary social reality.” This, I admit, says little and raises such questions as what is meant by “objective” and what is meant by “reality”. But we must not rush to consider ultimate questions but see this description in a historical context as a polemical weapon against Romanticism, as a theory of exclusion as well as inclusion. It rejects the fantastic, the fairy-tale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the highly stylized, the purely abstract and decorative. It means that we want no myth, no *Maerchen*, no world of dreams. It implies also a rejection of the improbable, of pure chance, of extraordinary events, since reality is obviously conceived at that time, in spite of all local and personal differences, as the orderly world of nineteenth century science, a world of cause and effect, a world without miracle, without transcendence even if the individual may have preserved a personal religious faith. The term “reality” is also a term of inclusion: the ugly, the revolting, the low are legitimate subjects of art. Taboo subjects such as sex and dying (love and death were always allowed) are now admitted into art. (11)

Clearly, this definition allows for the description of sex, of scenes that are potentially revolting or shocking, and asks for scenes to be probable and possible both socially and scientifically. This latter condition is satisfied by Joseph’s scene of discovery, as pointed out above. For György Lukács, “the essence of the [realist] novel consisted in the description of a problematic individual in his development from an unreflecting state of existence to a clear self-awareness” (Keller 35), a description that clearly fits the scene of Joseph’s loss of his ignorance of his Jewish origins, and his establishing of a new identity as its result. In addition, “Lukács describes his ideal of the literary work as one in which the whole subject matter is integrated into the plot of the story and in which the illusion of a continuous story is upheld throughout” (32), a rule that Joseph’s scene of discovery does not break in any sense. What is more, “the writer, according to Lukács, should be able to personalize the problems and contradictions of the society, which he wants to scrutinize, in the fate of his heroes” (32). Such a centralization of Joseph’s circumcision, assigning it a decisive and symbolical role in both Joseph’s life story and the novel’s discussion of the Jewish condition, seems to do exactly that: “personaliz[ing] the problems and contradictions of [...] society [...] in the fate of his her[o]” (32). It is thus possible to conclude that the scene in which Lily discovers Joseph’s circumcision meets both Koestler’s own criteria of realism and those of two classic theorists of realist fiction, René Wellek and György Lukács.

The second reason why this scene is criticized by several commentators is its alleged triviality and lack of painfulness and seriousness. In Michael Scammel’s words, “in the age of the Holocaust, it was an extraordinarily feeble motivation for such a momentous change

in Joseph’s life” (281). A similar opinion seems to be expressed, although not so explicitly, by Nathan Glazer: “One is asked to believe that a proper young Englishman, who never completely realized he was half-Jewish, could discover his identity in the bed of a fascistic Englishwoman and be shocked into becoming a *halutz*, a member of a collective, giving up his privacy and freedom – for what?” (56). For Peter Quenell, it is “a ludicrous love-adventure with a badly behaved young Englishwoman”, and Richard Denis Charques likewise calls it a “ludicrous episode of love” (517). In other words, these commentators seem to find an abruptly ended love relationship, and scolding in the context of a sexual experience, or to be more precise, in the context of one’s *first* sexual experience, too trivial, and simply unable to traumatize.

Scammell is, in fact, both factually incorrect and unfair in his judgment. Incorrect in that he is talking about “the age of the Holocaust” (281), whereas Joseph’s traumatic experience can be argued to have happened before: “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC defines the Holocaust as the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies *during World War II*” (Friedman 1; my emphasis). The Second World War is usually deemed to have started on September 1, 1939, and Joseph discusses this experience in the novel at some point in 1937, shortly after moving to Palestine, describing an event that clearly happened considerably earlier. But Scammell seems to be struggling with the chronology in general, since he refers to Lily as a “neo-fascist” (280), which is clearly nonsense in reference to a character who was active in the 1930s. What makes him also unfair is that he demands a traumatic experience of a similar type and brutality from Joseph that Jews in Central Europe suffered (or were soon to suffer in the future – from the perspective of the novel’s chronology), which is clearly an unrealistic demand for a member of the British gentry in the 1930s, Jewish or not. While Scammell claims that *Thieves in the Night* “betrayed Koestler’s ideal of realism” (281) because of Joseph not having experienced the kind of tortures that those surviving the Holocaust did, given Joseph’s citizenship and social background, realism would have suffered *exactly if* the novel *had claimed* that such cruelty existed in Joseph’s past.

The rest of the critics, while they agree with Scammell’s view that the incident could be considered trivial or ludicrous, seem to do so in terms of its ability to cause trauma, and not in comparison to the Holocaust. In the clinical sense, they are right. Jane Robinett summarizes the symptoms necessary for the diagnosis of trauma as follows:

The current diagnostic criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV* outline a traumatic event as one in which the person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with an event or events that involve “actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity” or that of another person. The response to such an event involves “intense fear, helplessness, or horror” because, in the face of these events, the person can neither escape nor resist effectively. Traumatic events put the individual at risk psychologically as well as physically because they “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning.” Terror and helplessness overburden the ordinary psychic defenses, exploding the grounds of the belief systems on which we build, and with which we defend, our individual and collective identities. (293)

It is clear that in this sense, when Joseph claims that the “result [of his marred sexual encounter] was a kind of shell-shock” (Koestler, *Thieves* 76), he is either exaggerating or is wrong. Lily’s dis-

gusted and upset reaction, and her abrupt rejection of Joseph, are not threatening his life or bodily safety, nor does he experience fear, horror or helplessness as a result.

At the same time, just because such an experience does not meet the clinical definition of trauma, it does not mean that it is automatically unable to cause anxiety and self-conscious behavior or lead to a questioning of one’s identity. As Paul Gilbert explains, “threats to the self, be they direct (for example, threat of violence or rejection) or more indirect and symbolic (for example, attacks on self-presentation) will stimulate basic defensive emotions such as anger or anxiety” (1208). And there is more than a threat of rejection in Joseph’s case, as this rejection actually happens in a rather uncivilized manner, while the incident is also, at the same time, an attack on his self-presentation, since it forces him to see himself in a different light: no longer as a member of the English gentry, an Oxford student, a lover, but as a Jewish person. So, clearly, Joseph’s encounter does represent a threat to Joseph’s self-representation, and thus it should not come as a surprise, nor should it be considered unrealistic that he develops some defensive emotional response: in his case not anger, but anxiety. This aspect is, in fact, even shared with actual trauma, as here, just as in the case of trauma, the event is “exploding the grounds of the belief systems on which we build, and with which we defend, our individual [...] identities” (Robinett 293).

Similarly, it is also important to realize that the issue of the existence of circumcision as a practice among the non-Jewish population is also *beside the point* not only because of Joseph’s acceptance of Lily’s reading of his penis, but exactly for the very reason that it *is a reading*. To quote Ruth D. Johnston, “[t]he ambiguous significance of circumcision derives from its status as *actual physical mark* and as *sign*” (10; emphasis original), necessitating a reading. And if it is a sign that needs to be interpreted, it leads to a range of possible readings, each different from each other, frequently contradictory or mutually exclusive:

Circumcision has been read to be a sign of everything from sexual hygiene, to cosmetic appearance, to tribal identity or a mark of adulthood, to either diminishing or enhancing sexual desire, to increased or decreased fertility, to patriarchal subjugation, to enhanced purity, to the improvement of sexual endurance, to a form of attenuated castration, to menstrual envy, to a substitute for human sacrifice. (Gilman 117)

In other words, rather than being a mere physical feature, the result of a simple surgical procedure being performed either for religious or hygienic reasons, as some critics of Koestler’s novel seem to claim, circumcision is a contested sign, offering itself up to different readings, but *not allowing* a lack of reading. Whether it is a sign of belonging or not belonging to the upper classes (as suggested by the absence of the practice among the poorer populations of Britain), whether it is a sign of health and illness, or hygiene and the lack of it (as the British medical view of the period suggests), whether it is “the sign of the Covenant” (Koestler, *Thieves* 76) and its absence (as the Jewish reading adopted by Joseph would suggest), or “the stigma of the race incised into his flesh” (76), as Lily chose to read it, the fact remains that it is a sign that needs to be read and it is read under all conditions, even in the Britain of the 1930s.

What this means for Joseph’s situation then is that once he encounters Lily’s reading and accepts it, as has been pointed out above, it collapses his existing identity as a member of the British gentry, and forces him into the position of a Jewish male. What follows in the text is revelatory:

Everything was changed. He began making inquiries about his father. He made a cult of his memory, to atone for his own cowardly part in the conspiracy of silence about him. This led to a breach with his mother’s family. He took rooms in London and frequented the people whom he was henceforth to regard as his own. At first he did not like them, but he read the newspapers and learned that Incidents were the rule in their lives. He read books and learned that it had been the same in the past. (76)

The expression “cowardly” and “conspiracy of silence” suggest that he retrospectively interprets his previous behavior as an attempt at keeping his identity consciously hidden, or in other words, as an attempt at *passing*. Such an understanding is even further supported by Rabbi Greenfeld’s interpretation of the scene later in the novel: “[b]ecause you were a traitor in disguise, He showed you up in the nakedness of your flesh” (103). At the same time, the claim that “everything was changed”, Joseph’s radical “breach with his mother’s family” who no longer accept him, and his decision “henceforth to regard as his own” all other Jews, remind one of *coming out*. This, in fact, is no mere coincidence. As Lori Hope Lefkowitz explains, “The Jew is a frightening reminder that the categories by which culture confidently asserts the knowability and naturalness of gender and sexuality have no reliable boundaries. And it is the potential hiddenness, the potential the Jew has to pass into privilege (a potential of the light-skinned black) that exaggerates the anxiety” (98). Reaching back to Genesis 27, the story of Jacob and Esau, she discusses the rootedness of male Jewish identity in the practices of *mimicry*, *drag*, *passing*, and *gay camp*. A similar connection is also made by Ruth D. Johnston, who emphasizes that “Jewish difference must [...] be read in terms of the concept of *masquerade*” (2–3; my emphasis), since “both Jew and homosexual inhabit a secrecy/disclosure *dialectic of the closet*, undergoing traumas of recognition as well as opacities” (25; my emphasis).

In other words, even if it could be argued that Joseph did not engage in the practice of reading, much less acting on, his difference until his encounter with Lily, he most certainly does so from the moment she reads him as Jewish. He reinterprets his own existence before this decisive night in the light of Lily’s reaction, casting himself in the role of somebody in the *Jewish closet* (Johnston’s term), undergoing a radical and painful version of coming out in reaction (in that it necessitates a complete break with his family and a complete reinterpretation of his identity). Joseph is both right and wrong when he claims that it was merely “a squalid little incident” (Koestler, *Thieves* 76). In the sense of being without momentousness, the incident was certainly not little. It was, however, indeed unimportant, or much rather arbitrary in the sense that, as he goes on to explain, “Lily had merely been an instrument, and perhaps without her some other incident would have produced the same result” (76). In the sense that Jewish passing/masquerade can be considered a common experience in anti-Semitic environments, and that circumcision (or the lack of it) is a sign that society eventually forces one to read, indeed, the Lily-incident seems both arbitrary and inevitable, just as Joseph’s identification of Lily as an instrument suggests.

Returning now to the question of the ability of such an event to be psychologically taxing, as well as strong enough to influence one’s life radically, Johnston and Lefkowitz are in complete harmony of opinion. They both suggest that such an experience can lead to serious psychological effects. For the latter, “[p]assing is about thresholds, and thresholds are places marked by anxiety” (Lefkowitz 101), while the former goes even further in her use of words, suggesting that, as it was mentioned above, “both Jew and homosexual inhabit a secrecy/disclosure dialectic of the closet, undergoing traumas of recognition as well as opacities” (Johnston 25).<sup>5</sup>

Michael Scammell’s insistence on the scene being inappropriate and unable to lead to the kind of anxiety that would leave an indelible imprint on one’s life – and what is more, as something that is unpardonably trivial in the light of the Holocaust – is even more puzzling, given the fact that while discussing this scene and Koestler’s stubbornness about it staying in the novel, he reveals how Koestler himself could have had a similar encounter and how it remained with him. In his five-and-a-half-page discussion of the novel, Scammell devotes one and a half pages to this issue. He mentions that “Koestler *refused to alter* them [i.e. sexually explicit scenes], even when Peters intervened on the side of Macmillan” (Scammell 280; my emphasis), and as far as this particular episode is concerned, “Koestler revised the scene to imply that the penis was no longer erect in the crucial scene but *insisted on keeping the incident*” (281; my emphasis), repeating the same claim for even a third time: “Koestler’s *insistence on sticking to the sexual slur*” (281; my emphasis). That he has to repeat Koestler’s strong feelings about keeping the scene three times in his account should in itself reveal how much this is not something that can only serve as “extraordinarily feeble motivation” (281). Yet what should have done this even more clearly is this statement by Scammell: “Koestler claimed that Joseph’s dismissal by his lover was *a true story*, based on something that had happened to ‘somebody I knew’ (*most likely himself and most likely in Germany*)” (281; my emphasis). The claim is, shockingly, again repeated for a second time for emphasis, but it is nevertheless ignored as evidence as to the weight such an incident could have even much later in one’s life: “Koestler’s insistence on sticking to the sexual slur suggests that it was indeed *autobiographical in origin*” (281; my emphasis). Besides evidence about the misconceived universality of circumcision in Great Britain in the 1930s, as well as psychological, cultural and hermeneutical arguments about the seriousness and meaningfulness of such an experience, Koestler’s insistence on keeping the scene and Scammell’s linking it to the author’s own chronic frustration also underlines its appropriateness as Joseph’s experience of special significance.

To sum up, the claims regarding the scene’s alleged lack of realism and lack of gravity are unfounded. In terms of its realism, it satisfies not only Koestler’s own criteria of realism, but also those of René Wellek and György Lukács. In relation to this question, it could be shown that in contrast to repeated claims of circumcision’s universality in the United Kingdom during the 1930s, the practice was dependent on one’s social class, in harmony with how the novel presents it. As far as the scene’s gravity is concerned, a review of relevant sources on trauma, shame and anxiety supports the conclusion that such an experience can have a radical and lasting impact on one’s life, just as the author’s chronic frustration rooted in a similar experience did. Finally, it is of crucial importance that as the scene is based on the unveiling of the circumcised penis, a culturally conditioned sign that elicits a reading, and the scene has a hermeneutical importance linked to strategies of passing and coming out, Koestler’s novel portrays what Ruth D. Johnston calls the Jewish closet. In so doing, the novel goes beyond a realistic and convincing portrayal of an upper-class British Jew’s Lukácsian journey to self-awareness and Zionism, and shows a universal experience of Jewish existence under the conditions of diasporic existence in a hostile society.

**[Notes]**

<sup>1</sup> While the novel is, indeed, *lesser-known*, compared to *Darkness at Noon*, it is certainly not a forgotten book in the strict sense. In fact, there has been a resurgence of interest in this text, with a range of articles appearing since 2014 (cf. Stähler, “Historical Argument”; Stähler, “Making Peace”; Vernyik, “He Is Not English”; Vernyik, “Straight Out”; Weßel). What is more, besides specialist texts, *Thieves in the Night* is even briefly mentioned in Andrew Sanders’ *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* as one of Koestler’s “two interesting, if less satisfying, novels of the 1940s” (568). That being said, it would arguably deserve more attention than it has received so far, for at least two reasons. The first one is the novel’s topicality: its focus on issues such as terrorism, migration, rape trauma, war trauma, and the role and responsibility of intellectuals in major international crises make it relevant for the twenty-first-century reader. The second reason has to do with the book’s reception. As has been shown elsewhere (Vernyik, “He Is Not English”; Vernyik, “Straight Out”), although the contemporary reviews, and especially the British ones, were negative, they were demonstrably biased, and reacted to the novel’s criticism of the policies and attitude of the British administration of Palestine, and not to the novel’s literary qualities. Unfortunately, until the appearance of the above-mentioned articles, publications on Koestler either ignored the book in reaction to those reviews from the 1940s or, alternatively, repeated their criticism without reinvestigating their claims or at least putting them in context.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that they met at a club, during a summer vacation, that is, most emphatically *not* at university, is most probably not because of Lily’s social background, but on the one hand her age – “Lily was five years older than Joseph” (Koestler, *Thieves* 75) – and on the other that she was a woman: while the number of women in higher education increased between 1901 and 1935, British universities were mostly attended by men even in the mid-1930s: while in 1901 19.1% of British full-time university students were women, the figure only increased to 27.2% by 1935. In Oxford and Cambridge (and the two of them met in Oxford), the ratio was even lower, with 9.1% in 1901 and 13% in 1935 (Dyhouse 818).

<sup>3</sup> Circumcision, as a seemingly reliable sign for identifying Jewish men, was used, among other indicators, by the Nazis themselves, even if on multiple occasions it had proven more controversial and unreliable than those employing it as a method of detection might have thought possible. As Nechama Tec explains, “[m]en could be more easily identified through circumcision. [...] And so realistically, Jewish men had more to fear than Jewish women” (Tec 217 qtd. in Huebel 111). In fact, this strategy of identification was not only used by the authorities, but also by members of the general public. In Tec’s book, a Holocaust survivor, Alexandra Sołowejczyk-Guter, recounts the story of a Jewish man who looked Polish enough to try and pass as a member of the majority (in this case Polish) society, only to have been pulled into a courtyard: “the Pole threatened, made our friend pull down his pants, and then examined his documents” (Tec 215 qtd. in Huebel 111). Yet this strategy occasionally failed. Nazis at times arrested Turks or Arabs as a result of their “Jewish” appearance, and while they were, as a rule, free to go once they had proved their identity, if they failed to do so, the authorities would often resort to ascertaining if the arrested person was circumcised, being unaware of the use of the same practice amongst Muslims: “I tried to explain as best as I could that I was not a Jew but an Azeri Turk. They then demanded to see my organ, which had the mark of Jewishness. I tried to explain that Muslims also had this mark, which had passed from Judaism to Islam. But they did not believe it. They incarcerated me for several days” (Ülküsal 55 qtd. in Baer 33). Likewise, not all Jews were circum-

cised: already as early as the mid-nineteenth century there were parents who refused to let their sons be circumcised, “out of concern that the rite might harm [their] child” (Judd 21).

<sup>4</sup> Given the fact that none of the critics finding fault with the scene’s realism seem aware of the fact that realism itself is an artifice, and it has just as much of a tradition or code as any other mode of writing, the present article does not deal with the post-structuralist and post-colonial criticism of the concept (cf. Hirsch; Jaffe).

<sup>5</sup> While the main focal points of this paper are Joseph’s quasi-traumatic experience, its realism, and the extent of the momentousness of this experience in relation to its function as the motivator of twists in the plot, it is important to stress here that the use of the words *passing*, *closet*, *drag* and *closet* are not coincidental, and are not meant in a purely metaphorical sense. Johnston understands, or much rather defines, the Jewish closet in a sense where “the epistemological space of the Jewish closet [...] reveals its structural affinities with the gay closet” (1). In fact, in her view, while the “incoherences of Jewish difference serve to establish its analogy with gay identity [...] the visible stigma of circumcision transforms the relation of the closets from one of analogy into one of ‘masked repetition’” (1) thus positing a vital link between a sexual minority and a racial minority, especially in terms of their passing as members of the dominant group.

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# [ The Suburban Poetry of Louis Simpson: The Problem of Identity ]

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**[Abstract]** *This article examines, through a close reading of representative poems, the poetics of suburban identity in the work of the American poet Louis Simpson, a leading critic of suburban conformity and intellectual decline in the second half of the twentieth century. His poetry confronts the alienation and cultural deadness of suburbia with optimistic predictions about the future of American civilization made by Walt Whitman and Frederick Jackson Turner. Simpson's response to the challenges of postwar suburban culture is defined by a wide range of emotions, from the smug rejection of suburbia in his early work to a celebration of his self-imposed exile within a milieu that he grew to respect and love over the course of his long career.*

**[Keywords]** *American poetry; history; suburbia; identity; Louis Simpson; Walt Whitman; American Dream*

This article analyzes the exploration of suburban identity in the work of the American poet Louis Simpson (1923–2012) by offering close readings of a representative selection of Simpson's poems from all stages of his career. This body of suburban poems by Simpson is related to the notions of American progress and pioneering spirit which were proposed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Walt Whitman and Frederick Jackson Turner. Simpson was born in Kingston, Jamaica. He was of Scottish, African, Russian and Jewish origin, and he emigrated to the U.S. at the age of 17 to study at Columbia University, became a WWII hero in Europe, was then an expatriate writer and university student in Paris, before finally returning to America and making his mark as a poet, editor, and university professor. During a publishing career that lasted from the 1940s to the 2000s, Simpson often explored the position of the poet as an insider to the suburban American experience, commenting upon the postwar alienation and commodification of suburbia which he saw as a betrayal of traditional American values such as idealism and self-reliance. Early in his career, Simpson co-edited *New Poets of England and America: An Anthology*, which became the definitive formalist selection of new postwar American poetry, while the rival anthology of the time, *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, edited by Donald Allen, responded to Simpson's anthology by showcasing a memorable array of anti-establishment poets such as the Beats, New York Poets, Black Mountain poets and other avantgardists.

Simpson's early poetry volumes, which included *The Arrivistes: Poems 1940–1949* (1949), *Good News of Death and Other Poems* (1955), and *A Dream of Governors: Poems* (1959), were cast as a formal, intellectual, allusive, and challenging twentieth-century reincarnation of English metaphysical poetry. This approach to poetry was championed by the New Critics and became represented by the poems in the above-mentioned formalist anthology which Simpson co-edited. As Robert von Hallberg explains, such poetry, also published in the late 1940s and 1950s by other poets of Simpson's generation including Richard Wilbur, Richard Howard and Howard Nemerov, focused on three broad themes – animals, the fine arts, and travel (*American Poetry and Culture* 62). As Edward Brunner notes, the poetic style and thematic focus of these postwar American academic poets was also a result of their response to what their audience expected – a poetry that could “entertain them, instruct them, and convince them of their importance” by being “reassuringly ‘difficult’ without losing its accessibility” (x). By the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, Simpson had grown weary of this mode and followed the revisionist example of Charles Olson, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Donald Hall, Robert Bly, James Wright and other poets of his generation who, at this point, departed from the poetics of academic formalism and started to practice a more candid and formally liberated approach to form and language. The new American poetry of the late 1950s and early 1960s, however difficult to define, would accommodate a greater range of emotional honesty, clarity and sincerity than had been made possible by traditional approaches to poem-writing whose hallmarks included strict adherence to rhyme, meter, figurative language, and liberal use of poetic diction and emotional detachment. The transition from impersonal and formal works toward personal poems and those in open forms is explained by Brunner as a 1950s “poetics of civic responsibility” on the part of Simpson and his poet contemporaries, who imagined “ways in which their own anxiety and desperation could find some outlet” – which, in their case, meant turning inward for the subject matter of their poetry. (253)

From the beginning, Simpson was concerned with portraying the ambivalent relationship of the American poet to his European roots and with the role of the artist within the anti-intellectual framework of the pioneering American spirit. “To the Western World” features

a history-conscious poet who tries hard to come up with a viable cultural tradition in the American “wilderness / Where the axe echoes with a lonely sound, / The generations labor to possess / And grave by grave we civilize the ground” (*Collected Poems* 90). In “Orpheus in America”, Simpson comments directly on the cultural corruption of his adopted homeland, assuming the mask of the Greek prophet who likens America to a history-less “desert with a name” which on the one hand “begins antiquity” in a gesture of confident cultural appropriation of earlier European cultures (Rome, Italy, France, Greece), yet which on the other hand is also portrayed as instrumental in having squandered the opportunity to construct a model civilization and culture based on Antiquity, as the poet’s land, an idealized “Arcady / Has turned to stone” and the whole of America “darkens like a lapse of memory” in its ignorance (*Collected Poems* 93). The new country is portrayed as an uncultured wasteland in which there “are no palaces, but lifted stone, / The pyramids of Egypt, steles / of Ur” (93). The form of “Orpheus in America” represents a transition from early formalist intellectualism to free-verse ironic commentary on American civilization, a stylistic development which would be complete by the time Simpson published his next volume.

Although Simpson’s early work received its fair share of critical approval, the ground-breaking book for him was in fact his fourth, *At the End of the Open Road* (1963). William Stafford explains the considerable attention Simpson received for this book, as its author successfully “plays against this pattern of Westward movement, tagging with it Whitman references but darkening it toward disquieting terminations” (61). Indeed, Simpson dramatizes the discontent of the poet who had high hopes for postwar American society yet found out that postwar suburbanization and the related proliferation of conformity and consumerism everywhere had debased the traditional American myths about a nation of strong, rugged, and free individuals who pursue the middle-class suburban dream of ideal living between the city and country. The book’s title refers to a poem by Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”, in which the nineteenth-century poet appeals to the would-be traveler and fortune-seeker to sever old roots and pursue a new frontier of possibility: “AFOOT and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose” (297). Whitman’s poem is an extended cosmic call to Americans to abandon their conventional urban identity and enjoy the freedom of travel, physical as well as mental, since “the secret of the making of the best persons” is “to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth” (300). Harold Aspiz emphasizes the perennial attraction of the poem to all those who could relate to the open road as a symbol of “opportunity for personal and spiritual renewal” (170). The spiritual dimension of renewal through imagined mobility was really more important to Whitman than the physical travel itself, and America in his time seemed to be full of latent potential for such fulfilment: “The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness, / I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times, / Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged” (297). Whitman’s poem also posits the American identity as spiritual as well as materialistic, crucially defined by the pioneering atmosphere of explorers in the new continent. Such an optimistic conflation of internal wellbeing and its projection onto an external American landscape was also endorsed by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who argued for the historic role of the Western frontier in the formation of a healthy American identity: “This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (200). The corruption of this optimistic view of America as a land of unlimited opportunity

whose shifting frontier enables individual as well as collective achievement and growth is what Simpson savagely attacks in the poems of *At the End of the Open Road*.

Throughout the volume, Simpson keeps questioning Whitman's optimistic vision, reacting with a mixture of anger and sadness at having lost Whitman's belief in a culture of progress and in the spiritual and material achievement of subsequent generations. The first poem of the book, "In California", introduces the mask of a pessimistic student of the postwar suburban sprawl in the Golden State: "Here I am, troubling the dream coast / With my New York face, / Bearing among the realtors / And tennis players my dark preoccupation" (*At the End of the Open Road* 11). The speaker's pessimism contrasts with the bright-natured temperament of the locals. Where the nineteenth-century expansion of the American frontier brought "an epical clatter— / Voices and banjos, Tennessee, Ohio, / Rising like incense in the sight of heaven", the promise of the frontier seems lost forever by the twentieth century, since "Today, there is an angel at the gate", and a further expansion of the American imagination and physical space, which was an option in Whitman's lifetime, no longer seems viable, since "the white row of the Marina / Faces the Rock" and the poet is advised to "Turn around the wagons here" (11). Ronald Moran explains that Simpson's task as a spokesman for American culture is much more difficult than Whitman's, for in nineteenth century America there still "were frontiers—economic, social, and political, all of which were made possible by a physical frontier that still had somewhere to go", while in Simpson's suburbia of the 1960s, the poet has to "turn on the inward spotlight to find a [substitute] frontier; an introspection" that "inevitably lights up and focuses brightly on disappointments" (66). Simpson realizes that the myth of California as a promised land of suburban opportunity has become irrevocably lost:

Lie back! We cannot bear  
The stars any more, those infinite spaces.  
Let the realtors divide the mountain,  
For they have already subdivided the valley. (11)

The pattern of subdivisions gave rise to tract housing in the postwar suburban communities of California, which in turn enabled the proliferation of an anti-intellectual atmosphere of consumerism and conformity in which dissenters were not tolerated. Simpson's criticism of American suburbia is similar to the complaint of the historian Lewis Mumford, who at the same time argued that, in the postwar American suburbs,

a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible. (486)

A similar dismissal of twentieth-century American suburbanization has been notably expressed even in classic works of fiction, from *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis to *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, yet the suburbs did not provoke only criticism. Kenneth T. Jackson considered

suburbanization beneficial for the construction of a uniquely American identity, popular culture, and civic awareness. When Jackson dubbed American suburbia the “Crabgrass Frontier”, referring to the cliché of suburbanites’ obsessive preoccupation with lawn maintenance in the suburbs, he meant this as more than mere criticism. Beyond the surface of the rat race with one’s peers and neighbors, Jackson claimed that “suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture” by showcasing “such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness” (Jackson 4). However, Jackson’s magisterial 1980s defense of American suburbia should be read with the sobering knowledge of the recent ethnicization of America wherein, according to William H. Frey, the claim of racial and class homogeneity no longer seems tenable in the face of the recent “diversity explosion” in many cities and suburbs alike.

“In California” is a poem in which Simpson avoids any discussion of achievement in the field of materialist gratification. Instead, the poet mourns the loss of the Edenic ability of the Golden State to attract newcomers and sustain the interest of old-timers to dream of a bright future in an unspoiled environment. This cry is not new. From a historical perspective, Simpson voices a traditional lament about the loss of Whitmanian hope for the cultivation of a new frontier, while choosing suburbia as a surrogate target for his anger and despair at having lost a horizon to pursue. David Wyatt explains that writers in California have always waxed nostalgic about a mythic pioneering past while being “protected by the experience of a continually disappearing landscape from some of the more stubborn nostalgias” (xvi). Wyatt also argues that America’s history of cultural insecurity “turned to its landscapes as a unique possession to which its response could give meaning and value” (206). Simpson’s poem implies that the pioneers from the time of cultural innocence “cannot turn or stay” in the debasement of the frontier mythology in postwar California, and that their only option is to pursue yet another horizon of opportunity while “the great cloud-wagons move / Outward still, dreaming of a Pacific” (*At the End* 11). The possibility of a frontier beyond the California coast remains imaginary, as the postwar development of California’s suburbs and valleys becomes a story of cultural loss in which the purity of the American landscape and its unlimited potential have to be re-invented by the poet.

For better or worse, the best-known Simpson poem in his fourth book is “In the Suburbs”, a short epigram whose memorable indictment of suburban consumerism and intellectual ennui is directed at the poet himself as well as at his imagined audience:

There’s no way out.  
You were born to waste your life.  
You were born to this middleclass life

As others before you  
Were born to walk in procession  
To the temple, singing. (*At the End* 12)

As Pavlína Hácová documents, Simpson’s poems such as “In the Suburbs” use “an ironic tone to emphasize the moral emptiness of middle-class American life” (1478). Moreover, the ironic cloak is undermined by the poet’s sincere attempt to situate his suburb in a historic context

of religious and architectural dogma. According to Jo Gill, the suburban setting functions like “a prison, and suburban life a coercive ritual”, while it might actually be possible to read the poem as more of an ambivalent commentary on suburban conformity or, more radically, “as a parody of the contemporary criticism of suburbia, which by this time was at its peak” (180). Indeed, “In the Suburbs” exposes the banality and spiritual emptiness of postwar American suburbia while suggesting that the criticism might be read as a sincere attempt at identity construction – since, as Simpson has said in a preface to his *Collected Poems*, “the more banal and ‘anti-poetic’ the material, the more there is for the poet to do” (xiv). However, even the most vitriolic denunciation of suburban ennui, such as “In the Suburbs”, is part of the larger thematic framework of Simpson’s poetry, which is, as Peter Stitt argues, the poet’s preoccupation with the manner in which his sensibility “reacts to and interacts with the society that surrounds him” (663). Leo Marx reminds us that “American writers seldom, if ever, have designed satisfactory solutions for their pastoral fables”, and it might be argued that even the postwar American poet of suburbia, like the earlier American protagonists of *Walden*, *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, which Marx expounds on, “is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless”, and when, “at the same time, he pays a tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter” (364). The achievement of “In the Suburbs” is thus in its elliptical indictment of the postwar suburbanization of California, seen as detrimental to the possibility of a cultured identity of its people while also implying the concurrent decline of cultural and intellectual ambition in postwar American cities.

“On the Lawn at the Villa” is another poem in which Simpson explains the dilemma that lies at the core of his split identity – that of a suburban poet who feels alienated from his community yet longs to be recognized by its members: “It’s complicated, being an American, / Having the money and the bad conscience, both at the same time” (*At the End* 58). The realization of economic and social achievements might be read alongside the poet’s self-consciousness about his own marginalized position in a society that grows increasingly anti-intellectual and uncultured. This attitude, again, was typical of many postwar poets who, as von Hallberg documents, were painfully aware “of being the unacknowledged representatives of national culture, or vulgarity, wealth, and power, and implicated in the expansion of [the American] empire” (85).

*At the End of the Open Road* ends with three strong poems that mourn the suburban corruption of American civilization while placing it in its historical context. In “Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain”, Simpson’s strategy is to indulge in whimsical conversation with the bard of modern American poetry whose iconic statue is to be found on a rock in Bear Mountain State Park, New York, by the Hudson River. Addressing the elder poet, Simpson complains about the loss of Whitman’s belief in a glorious American future: “Where are you, Walt? / The Open Road goes to the used-car lot” (64). While the elder poet replies by calming Simpson down (“Why do you reproach me? / I freely confess I am wholly disreputable. / Yet I am happy, because you have found me out.”), Simpson’s complaint about postwar America and its corruption intensifies as he argues that the perpetrators of the corruption, the realtors, have “turned a deaf ear” to complaints by the critics of suburban commercialization and, consequently, “had contracted American dreams” (65). Simpson’s prediction for the future of American society is tragic (“All that grave weight of America cancelled! / Like Greece and Rome. / The future in ruins!”), while the legacy of cosmic Whitmanian optimism serves as a backdrop to Simpson’s negation of the American pastoralist dream in the suburbs, to be modelled on the absent ruins of European heritage: “The castles, the prisons, the cathedrals / Unbuilding, and roses / Blossoming from

the stones that are not there..." (65). In the final poem of *At the End of the Open Road*, "Lines Written Near San Francisco", Simpson explores the strategy of an earlier landscape poem by William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", and wonders whether the postwar materialist corruption of the American dream has really been necessary: "Say, did your fathers cross the dry Sierras / To build another London? / Do Americans always have to be second-rate?" (68). The loss of belief in the viability of a national culture is dramatized in the final section of the poem, in which the poet laments the imminent "end of America" and blames it on the heedless suburbanization of postwar years, the real estate developers who had "finished it—with gas drums / On the hilltops, cheap housing in the valleys" while making the lives of the people "mean and wretched" (69). Simpson realizes that Whitman's idealism has not been proven wrong, only misread, by the subsequent generations of modern and postwar Americans: "Whitman was wrong about the People, / But right about himself. The land is within. / At the end of the open road we come to ourselves" (69). This realization offers a crucial insight into the way in which the American dream of progress relies on the individual's ability to internalize the exploratory impulse to pursue new horizons. As Richard Howard noted, for Simpson, the battle for staking out an identity in postwar America ultimately became an exercise in self-realization, as "the man, who like any modern Odysseus returns from his wanderings to find the real battle on his own doorstep, in his own hall, at his own bedside" (517). The closure of Simpson's "Lines" is a telling metatextual comment on the reductionist dimension of the suburban critique which Simpson launches elsewhere. Ultimately, his America is still full of potential as "the land / The pioneers looked for, shading their eyes / Against the sun—a murmur of serious life" (70). As Robert McDowell realized, the importance of the poems in *At the End of the Open Road* lies in the fact that they seem to "represent us, the compromised modern tribe, wholly American, full of hope but just waking to the hard news that our national promise has been played out" (109).

In his later work, Simpson kept exploring the suburban setting as the locus of cultural dilemmas. In "Sacred Objects", he revisits the strategy of suburbia-bashing. He admits to having been persuaded, grudgingly, to take part "in a great experiment— / whether writers can live peacefully in the suburbs / and not be bored to death" (*Collected Poems* 218). Having discovered "an American muse / installed amid the kitchen ware", Simpson again evokes Whitman as a model pioneer whose ability to transcend the everyday is to be copied by the bored yet affluent suburbanite: "And the kingdom is within you... / the hills and all the streams / running west to the Mississippi" (*Collected* 218). The poem's crucial passage is the following expression of suburban happiness as manifest in the little details of one's daily routine: "There are your sacred objects, / the wings and gazing eyes / of the life you really have" (*Collected* 219). In "Quiet Desperation", the remark by Henry David Thoreau on the drabness of most people's lives assumes a suburban cloak as Simpson is invited to a party he does not want to go to, which makes him wonder whether a life spent on such minor decisions "can be the only life there is", while the ironic use of the televised drama of "the battle of Iwo Jima / is in progress, watched by his son" (*Owner of the House* 310), and the poet reacts to these impulses with a momentary revolt that proves futile: "A feeling of pressure... / There is something that needs to be done / immediately. // But there is nothing, / only himself. His life is passing, / and afterwards there will be eternity, / silence, and infinite space" (*Owner* 311). Poems like "Quiet Desperation" succeed, as Stitt documents, in the ingenious way in which they present the mid-life crisis of the suburban protagonist "with sympathy and from the inside of the man who is suffering through it" (669).

Perhaps the most important of Simpson's longer poems about suburban identity is "The Previous Tenant", a narrative about the tragic downfall of a Dr. McNeil, a model suburban husband and father in Point Mercy, a fictitious suburb whose hypocritical elites initially invite McNeil and his wife to all the prestigious sports and social clubs, yet when the specter of the husband's affair becomes public knowledge, the same community leaders try their best to drive the McNeil family out and destroy the husband's medical career by denouncing him (*Collected* 336–49). As McDowell realized, the achievement of this remarkable poem is in the understated yet powerful exposure of "the community's shallow cheerfulness masking racial prejudice and intolerance", which makes the poet sympathize with the ruined doctor and his lover, the social outcasts in the story (162).

In a rare poem of suburban humor, "How To Live on Long Island", Simpson waxes comic about the conformist hell of suburban Long Island and its juxtaposition with a far-away wilderness retreat for Jim, the poem's protagonist, who "cannot stand Long Island / without flying to Alaska" for a habitual hunting holiday while thinking of the brevity and precarious nature of his suburban lifestyle: "Every month when he pays his bills / Jim Bandy becomes a philosopher. / The rest of the time he's OK" (*Collected Poems* 325). Simpson's attitude to suburbia developed during the course of his career, from his early refusal to participate in its conformist narrative to the sympathy and humor which he used to reconcile himself with suburbia in the later poems. In "The People Next Door", the aging and lonely poet assumes a sympathetic attitude toward his neighbors, a young family with two children, for he too "was a family man", if only in "a phase to go through" (*Owner of the House* 350), and the former critic of suburbia now meekly confesses to liking his young neighbors, who remind him of an earlier, naive version of himself. Gone is the introspective hatred which dominated his earlier work; instead, Simpson is able to "rejoice at their incomings and outgoings", being present, from the insulating distance of a neighbor's house, at the moment "when Betty / goes out on her first date" and "Joey's being chosen / for the team" (351). While the style of Simpson's late suburban poems represents no stylistic departure from the sardonic free-verse narrative which he began using in the early 1960s, his attitude toward America and its suburbanization grows softer and more forgiving in his later work. It is as if Simpson realized his complicity in the social experiment of the postwar flight to the suburbs, treating this realization with an acceptance of self and society that revises the early, simplistic interpretations of suburbia as the epitome of maddening uniformity.

I close this discussion with "The Unwritten Poem", an *ars poetica* meditation on the virtue of the suburban lifestyle, in which Simpson revisits the inner conflict of having to write about feeling cultured and superior to his supposedly uncouth neighbors. Strangely, he discovers his "Italy", or the horizon of the cultured community that he has been looking for since his youth, in the very suburbia which he had spent a lifetime disparaging. Whitman was right, and the idealized setting for the transcendence of the self is to be found, among other places, in an anonymous postwar American suburb, "in your life here, on this street / where the houses from the outside / are all alike, and so are the people" (*Collected* 374). The achievement of this poem is in Simpson's realization that his house, street, and community are unique, important, American, and not to be traded for any foreign cultural traditions. Although the realization of his true identity will take "ardor and ingenuity", his acknowledgement of the viability of the suburban lifestyle is the crowning achievement of his suburban poetry. By recognizing the importance of relating to his friendly if superficial neighbors, Simpson sings praise to the suburban "life beginning with, 'Hi!' and ending with, 'So Long!'", observing the collective experience of the early morning rising of his neighbors

who “march to catch the 6:20—” and “hurl themselves into the flames” of their daily commute to the city (*Collected* 374). Having spent a career complaining about the lack of ruins, temples, and castles in America, Simpson realizes, in his late poems, that the genius of American suburbia is in its reincarnation of the pastoral dream of an ideal country life close to the city’s amenities.

Simpson’s poetry about suburbia and its potential for visionary enlightenment seems to be limited by what W.H. Auden calls the “masculine imagination”, with the poet’s propensity to dismiss “the here and now” while substituting it with “an essentially theatrical” adherence to “what is absent, on what has been or may be” (xi). What is crucial to Simpson’s achievement is, then, his successful exploration of the idealized past and his rewriting of the Whitmanian poetics of open-road exuberance and optimism. In other words, he succeeds in what Lawrence Buell calls criticizing the “corruption in the name of a purer American vision of a society” (34), portraying a typical American suburbia as synonymous with a model community which has been built on the Whitmanian impulse to explore the unknown limits of American civilization and celebrate the most banal details of everyday life.

Similar poetry that examines the untapped potential of suburbia to foster cultural development and bring about individual happiness has been written in the postwar period by many other poets of Simpson’s generation, for example by Richard Wilbur, Robert Bly, and Carolyn Kizer. Yet Simpson stands alone in his exploration of the poet’s struggle to seize the suburban moment, including situations which turn out to be pathetic, ridiculous, and nostalgic. In his epigrams about the cultural corruption of American suburbia, Simpson was able to deconstruct Whitman’s ideology of heedless optimism and submit it to serious re-evaluation in the atmosphere of Cold War consumerism and conformist conservatism. If Simpson’s suburban poems have made him a self-appointed outlaw, many other poets of his generation, as Robert von Hallberg documents, “have looked more searchingly and fairly at the national culture” while speaking from within the anti-intellectual atmosphere of suburbia (244). What Peter Monacell detected in modernists like Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams is to be seen even in the postmodern suburban poems of Simpson, namely the exploration of suburban spaces and settings which “sustain a sense of connection to land and history, a basis on which to build literary individuality, and an arena in which the imagination can continue its transformative work” (Monacell 137). By criticizing the conformist nature of the postwar American suburbs, Simpson managed to define an individualized dream of vibrant middle-class culture and community, even if only within the stereotypization of what John Archer jokingly called the “cookie-cutter homogeneity” of the suburban household (368). Simpson’s poetic cry against conformity and his exposure of the betrayal of American frontier mythology does not mean that he rejects the traditional appeal of detached suburban single-family housing, the dream-come-true for many generations of Americans who have craved house ownership and community affiliation that became possible in suburbia, the much-discussed American frontier environment between the city and country. As Hácová argues, in his best poems Simpson expresses “epiphanic moments whose intensity highlights the joys and weaknesses of American democracy” (1479). Moreover, reading Simpson as a revisionist prophet of Whitmanian optimism renders his suburban poetry important for its thematic contribution to the postwar development of literary identity. Simpson spent his career battling the impulse to disparage his conformist self, ultimately relishing what Jackson called “a private haven in a heartless world” (243). His writing from self-imposed suburban “exile” has enriched American culture despite his lifetime of ambivalence about the feasibility of crafting a viable suburban literary tradition.

## [Notes]

<sup>1</sup> See Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, eds., *New Poets of England and America* (New York: Meridian, 1957), and Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (New York: Grove, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent explanation of how the transition from formal to free verse happened in the work of several postwar American poets, see Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 540–1.

<sup>3</sup> For a humorous account of this intolerance, see John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Cambridge: Riverside, 1957), in which the fictional Drone family becomes the victim of postwar housing policies in the American suburbs.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2018), 4245–60.

<sup>5</sup> The Whitman statue is to be found on the trail that leads through the Trailside Zoo. See <http://www.trailsidezoo.org/plan-your-visit/trailside-map>

<sup>6</sup> See William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour”, in *Lyrical Ballads*, anonymous (Bristol: Briggs and Cottle, 1798), 201–10.

<sup>7</sup> See Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Longmans, 1910), 7.

<sup>8</sup> A surprisingly useful comparison can be made if one reads Simpson’s suburban poems alongside the much more traditional work of Phyllis McGinley, an author of light verse whose formal comic paeans on the joys of being a suburban housewife were popular from the 1930s to the 1960s. See, for example, Phyllis McGinley, *Times Three* (New York: Viking, 1960).

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# [ *Sweet is the lore which nature brings*: Continuum of the Human and Non-human Worlds in Wordsworth's Poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* ]

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**[Abstract]** *The following article presents an ecocritical reading of Wordsworth's poems in the Lyrical Ballads (1798–1802). It starts with an interpretation of the notion of the poet's "organic sensibility" as a key to Wordsworth's understanding of appropriate poetic diction, metre and verse, and ultimately the very subject matter of poetry. The subsequent sections of the article discuss several poems from the collection in which Wordsworth addresses the questions of symbiosis between the human and non-human worlds and the mission of poetry to deepen our appreciation of the environment and the role of humanity in protecting the complexity of life around us.*

**[Keywords]** *William Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads, English Romantic poetry, ecocriticism*

## [1] Introduction

“Ecology” (*Ökologie*) – as a science dealing with the relations of different organisms to their “environment”, which condition their existence<sup>1</sup> – was defined in 1866, at a time when the height of the Romantic movement had already passed.<sup>2</sup> However, the Romantic aesthetic and emotional “re-discovery” of nature did play a role in shaping the personality of the “father of ecology”, **Ernst Haeckel** (1834–1919). Haeckel was known as a gifted nature and landscape painter<sup>3</sup> whose interest in the aesthetic quality of the “art-forms” (*Kunstformen*) of nature was later materialized in a mature work with the self-same title, *Kunstformen der Natur* (1900).<sup>4</sup> Haeckel's life thus in many ways exemplifies an important aspect of our modern environmental consciousness: rigorously scientific analysis is not just informed by aesthetic and philosophical considerations, it is, in fact, inseparable from them.

The “revolution” of the *Lyrical Ballads* brought about a new understanding of poetry in relation to the natural world: poetry becomes the supreme voice for the organic continuum of human and non-human elements. The pastoral landscape of the Lake District, narrated in the language of the “common man”, presents a holistic idea of an authentic human existence, whose aesthetic, moral and spiritual sanity depends on the firmness of its bond with the environment.

This paper analyzes the essential principles of this ecological viewpoint articulated in Wordsworth's poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*. It starts by exploring the general layout and project of the *Lyrical Ballads*: i.e. the role of poetry in re-establishing and restoring a sense of the vital thread between the human and non-human worlds, moving on to the patterns of their co-existence as found in the poems themselves. It is to be hoped that such an eco-critical reading can contribute to the discussion between aesthetic and scientific approaches to one of the most pressing problems of our age.

## [2] *Possessed of more than usual organic sensibility: Wordsworth's “ecology of poetry”*

The mixed reactions to the first volume (1798) led Wordsworth to reconsider his unwillingness to engage in a “systematic defence” of this specific “class of poetry” that his and Coleridge's poems produced.<sup>5</sup> He was especially reluctant to force the reader “into an approbation of these Poems” on the basis of some “reasoning” related to their original intention. In an environment defined by the “gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers”, their core element, i.e. the “manners of rural life”, would not quite suit the “public taste” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 47). In the earlier “Advertisement” to the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's main line of argument was to present the poems in the volume as “experiments”, whereby he anticipated various difficulties and objections readers and critics may have faced while reading the volume. The preface to the second edition thus presents a more comprehensive explanation of the essentials which determine the form of the poems.

When Wordsworth talks about the greatest poets of the past, he stresses the correspondence of different historical eras with their respective “habits of association”, i.e. their manner of associating ideas and expressions. His manner is based on the “incidents of common life”

communicated in the language “of these men” (Cf. Wordsworth and Coleridge 172). However, their worthy “purpose” transcends the boundaries of mere theoretical discourse: it is not “false refinement or arbitrary innovation”, but instead a poetic process related to the very core of being a “Poet” (Cf. Wordsworth and Coleridge 175). A poet is “possessed of more than usual organic sensibility” and thinks “deeply” about his/her feelings: the naturalness of the linguistic reaction to the outside stimulus (“spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”) turns into a poetic event by being “recollected in tranquillity” through the agency of the poet him/herself. The liberating simplicity of rural life articulated in the “rustic” idiom of the rural people is thus modulated through the poet and comes back refined:

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much organic sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 175)

Introducing people to poetry means helping them take part in the “organic sensibility” of the poet: indeed, the poet articulates reality in a sense which communicates the “naturalness” of the emotional reaction: “But speaking in less general language, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 176). This “natural” language re-establishes a fundamental sense of correspondence between human and non-human elements; poetry is thus not an arbitrary entertainment without any real reference to the imagination and the language people speak. In fact, it is the finest form of language, because it articulates the vital link between the organic principles of biological existence and the inner movements of the human “soul”.<sup>6</sup>

Wordsworth's concept of poetry includes more than just an appropriate lexicon of “good” poetry; poetry should be driven by rhythmical patterns that recreate the specific organic sensations found in the natural environment and reflected in the inner rhythm of our bodily existence.<sup>7</sup> For Wordsworth, this means eliminating “poetic diction” from poetry, as it thwarts the “naturalness” of our reaction to poetry; i.e. he affirms the vital continuum between the impersonal (i.e. “natural”) or given aspects, such as rhythmical structures and sound sensations, and their aspiration to meaning in the human world. Indeed, a proper poetic rhythm needs to accommodate the core of the emotional response – the continuum of movement (or “excitement”) and its secondary effect, namely “recollection in tranquillity”. In the context of “poetic diction”, the reader is essentially left at the “mercy of the Poet” without being introduced to the core of poetry, i.e. to the liberating power of poems to valorize our emotions:

Our feelings are the same with respect to metre; for, as it may be proper to remind the Reader, the distinction of metre is regular and uniform, and not, like that which is produced by what is usually called POETIC DICTION, arbitrary, and subject to infinite

caprices upon which no calculation whatever can be made. In the one case, the Reader is utterly at the mercy of the Poet, respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion; whereas, in the other, the metre obeys certain laws, to which the Poet and Reader both willingly submit because they are certain, and because no interference is made by them with the passion, but such as the concurring testimony of ages has shown to heighten and improve the pleasure which co-exists with it. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 425)

This fundamental link articulated in poetry also restores the ethical and moral principles as they are found in nature: a poet has a unique propensity to confront the moral “sentiments” with “human passions”, since he/she possesses a unique gift of expressive power, i.e. his language is characterized by an equilibrium between “excitement” and “thinking”; indeed, these two psychic processes run parallel to each other. This also applies to the balance between “moral sentiments and animal sensations” that define the relationship between the natural and the personal/moral elements of human existence. Since a poet works with language, i.e. he/she expresses the above-mentioned equilibrium in language whose clarity guarantees its poetic effect, there should not be any real difference between “poetic” language and the everyday language of the common man. The communicative gift of the poet elevates “common language” and makes it into a medium conveying “human passions” and their “moral” significance:

The sum of what was said is, that the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men, and with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the Poet describes, as they are the sensations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be *proved* that it is impossible. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 424)

The complexity of the “psychosomatic” elements of verse (rhythmical and musical effects, the refined simplicity of the lexicon, etc.) makes poetry especially apt for communicating Wordsworth's revolution in aesthetics: his poetry – so to speak – in-forms by con-forming with the psychological and bodily disposition of humans. Ultimately, “the end of Poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 181). As James McKusick has aptly pointed out: “Wordsworth's advocacy of simple vernacular diction is predicated on his view that human passion incorporates the forms of nature. His metaphor of incorporation, or embodiment, is essentially ecological since it suggests that all language, and therefore all human consciousness, is affected by the ‘forms of nature’ that surround it” (36). Wordsworth's poetry thus aspires to prove a sense of continuum between the “natural” world, “natural” language and the deep sense of sympathy between the human and the non-human worlds.

This programme defines not only Wordsworth's poetic theory, but also his "poetic ecology": poetry reinstalls a sense of balance between the natural world and the world of the human spirit. For Wordsworth, these two things are – as we shall see – quintessentially inseparable.

### [3] ***Connect the landscape with the quiet of the sky: sympathy, nostalgia and a sense of belonging***

In "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth explores the relationship between the magnificent Welsh countryside and the mysterious ruins of an ancient Cistercian monastery. The place emanates a sense of balance and harmony which rests in the mutually beneficial co-existence, i.e. *sym-biosis*, of the countryside and the human element. The walk has an epistemological quality of a kind: the combination of the natural (i.e. given) reality with that of a supreme human achievement creates a unique insight into the reality of things:

Once again Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
[...] Once again I see  
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines  
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms  
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,  
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,  
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire  
The hermit sits alone. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 142)

The epistemological question is ultimately – as Jonathan Bate interestingly pointed out – that of the difference between human consciousness and nature and their mutual relationship, i.e. the age-old philosophical question of the tension between subject and object. Bate argues that one "strand of environmentalism [...] emphasizes the conservation of landscapes of 'natural beauty'." However, Bate argues that Wordsworth's position is different; it is "ecopoetic": "the 'mind of man' can be part of nature. 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' offers not a view in the manner of the picturesque, but an exploration of the inter-relatedness of perception and creation, a meditation on the networks which link mental and environmental space." (148)<sup>9</sup> In that sense, the other mental categories merge and create a perceptive continuum of space and time: the fragmented nature of the "lonely rooms" and "the din/ Of towns and cities" is lifted, and the poet sees into the "life of things". Moreover, this continuum enables the poet to reflect on his own life:

While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts

That in this moment there is life and food  
 For future years. (Wordsworth and Coleridge 144)

The natural world provides “food” for interpreting this continuum by offering sublime images of the inner movements (“The sounding cataract/Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,/The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,/Their colours and their forms, were then to me/An appetite: a feeling and a love” [...]) as well as “the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse/The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 145). Indeed, the poem reflects on the human element also in a different context: memories of the poet’s sister Dorothy (referred to as “Friend” and “Sister”) have marked the sensation of the place. The sym-biosis of the human and non-human elements of the environment is completed by being “inhabited” with the memories of the encounter: the weight of the absence of the dear one can be overcome in the presence of the environment to which she naturally belongs. The place is filled with a sense of *continuum that unites time and space*: it is not just a pastoral landscape defined by the fundamental sympathy of the human and the non-human, but it has a “*memory of being*” that fills life with joy and meaning. The two elements are inseparable, since “nature” is not viewed as the opposite of the human, but rather as its inner measure and a safeguard of a person’s sanity:

[...] wilt thou then forget  
 That on the banks of this delightful stream  
 We stood together; and that I, so long  
 A worshipper of Nature, hither came,  
 Unwearied in that service: rather say  
 With warmer love, oh! with far deeper zeal  
 Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,  
 That after many wanderings, many years  
 Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
 And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
 More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake. (146–147)

In another of the lyrical pieces, “Lines Written in Early Spring”, the central message circles around the impossibility of human flourishing beyond the magnificent “art-forms” and the vital energy of nature. While referring to the beauty and purity of the natural world, the poet “laments” the emptiness of the man-made world. Having destroyed the sense of continuum and distanced him/herself from the unique undivided insight nature can provide, man has made him/herself into an orphan with no “pleasure”:

The budding twigs spread out their fan,  
 To catch the breezy air;  
 And I must think, do all I can,  
 That there was pleasure there.

If I these thoughts may not prevent,  
 If such be of my creed the plan,  
 Have I not reason to lament  
 What man has made of man? (102)

Wordsworth proves his point by creating a profound feeling of *nostalgia*: the urban civilization not only alienates humans from the non-human, it also alienates them from the core of their humanity.<sup>10</sup> The consciousness of the profound danger threatening the pastoral equilibrium of the environment emphasizes the need to restore this consciousness, at least in the lyrical power of poetry. Poetry thus becomes a recollection of this lost balance: its unique value is the man-made reflection of the natural; it is the platform which conserves the vital continuum between “made” and “given”.

In fact, this is true not just in relation to the meditative pieces, but also to the narrative ones. A sense of interpretative continuum between the human and non-human worlds creates the basic tenor of the “lyrical ballads”: stories of simple people whose lives seem to be communicable only within the context of their environment and using metaphors that relate them back to their “natural” settings. This sym-biosis runs both ways. The stories – as we shall see – may be interpreted likewise.

#### [4] To dwell alone under the greenwood tree: getting in touch with the unspoilt source of being

The main core of the programme of Wordsworth’s “lyrical ballads” focuses on the poetic narratives of people who in different ways represent this sense of continuum with the natural cycle. As J. Bate suggests in his *Song of the Earth*, “the word ‘environment’ began to be applied to social contexts exactly because of the feeling of the alienation of city-dwelling which was identified by Wordsworth and others” (Bate 13). This insight is central to many of the key poems of the collection.

“Lucy Gray” combines a tragic story of a lost “solitary” girl with a seductive power of a myth: she is sent into town and goes missing during a snowstorm. Her parents start to look for her, but at a certain point her footprints disappear. Nevertheless, her story seems to continue and transform into the timeless presence of the cycle of life:

Yet some maintain that to this day  
She is a living Child,  
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray  
Upon the lonesome Wild.

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,  
And never looks behind;  
And sings a solitary song  
That whistles in the wind. (325)

Her tragic story thus becomes completed in the realm of nature, and only within this realm is it fully comprehensible. The logic of the final metaphor presupposes a sense of unity with the time-and-space continuum of the environment: she is to be identified with the elements of the Earth and the ever-present time frame of nature. If this poem is to be classified as an elegy, then the Freudian “work of mourning” (*Trauerarbeit*) reiterates the following fundamental position:

the transformation of the girl into the “solitary song/That whistles in the wind” can be understood as an interpretative framework that runs both ways. Indeed, the “solitary song” can symbolically (and imaginatively) be attributed to a lost girl, but it also helps to overcome the grief of bereavement in the psychological sense. Wordsworth thus reaffirms the fundamental insight of folklore, for which the sense of radical separation after death seems impossible to bear.

The famous story of “The Idiot Boy” thematizes a similar situation: Betty Foy sends his “idiot-boy” Johnny to fetch a doctor for her neighbor, who happens to be in grave danger and needs to receive care. However, the situation becomes dramatic after a couple of hours, because neither the doctor nor the boy return. The boy sits on the pony, and a double sense of symbiosis and joy overcomes him:

But when the pony moved his legs,  
 Oh! then for the poor idiot boy!  
 For joy he cannot hold the bridle,  
 For joy his head and heels are idle,  
 He's idle all for very joy.

[...]

His heart it was so full of glee,  
 That till full fifty yards were gone,  
 He quite forgot his holly whip,  
 And all his skill in horsemanship,  
 Oh! happy, happy, happy John. (121)

The story of Johnny's joy contrasts with the tragic moment of Susan Gale's illness and the excruciating troubles of the mother, who fears yet another tragedy. The happy ending of the story, i.e. Johnny being discovered, uncovers yet another aspect of the narrative: i.e. the self-discovery of the main protagonist. His “travel story” represents a liberating contrast to the man-made separation of his existence under permanent supervision. In that sense, it helps him rediscover himself as a part of a broader whole: his natural “organic sensibility” finally finds its self-articulation:

Now Johnny all night long had heard  
 The owls in tuneful concert strive;  
 No doubt too he the moon had seen;  
 For in the moonlight he had been  
 From eight o'clock till five.

And thus to Betty's question, he made answer,  
 like a traveller bold, (His very words I give to you,)  
 “The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,  
 And the sun did shine so cold.”  
 —Thus answered Johnny in his glory,  
 And that was all his travel's story. (132)

His happiness and joy become the “glory” of this seemingly failed “story”. In fact, the choice of the rhyme stresses the organic correspondence between the lyrical and narrative aspects of the text: indeed, the story is also to be interpreted against the “organic sensibility” of the lyrical. The dynamic interpretative relationship between the human and the non-human is thus deeply affirmed.

In “We Are Seven”, the logic of a family community is interpreted in the light of a time-and-space continuum. The narrator (“a little cottage girl”) tells a sad story of her large family which has been struck by two deaths, yet she insists “we are seven”. The imagery of her paradoxically joyful visits to the grave is again related to the natural cycle: the greenness of the grave represents the certainty of their being alive, or the impossibility of their being lost. Similarly to “Lucy Gray”, the unifying logic transcends the boundaries of the “human” and “non-human” worlds, or, indeed, the difference between the human world of ideas and the living, animated soul of nature. The two worlds interpret one another in the symbiotic framework of a pastoral: she cannot leave them, which creates a comically absurd vision of her daily jobs done in the graveyard and her meals eaten there:

“Their graves are green, they may be seen,”  
The little Maid replied,  
“Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,  
And they are side by side.

My stockings there I often knit,  
My ’kerchief there I hem;  
And there up on the ground I sit  
— I sit and sing to them.

And often after sunset, Sir,  
When it is light and fair,  
I take my little porringer,  
And eat my supper there. (101)

In “Ruth”, the protagonist flees her family after her father took another “Mate”. She finds a new partner (“a lovely Youth”), gets married and is to embark for America. However, before they leave, her husband abandons her. Ruth goes mad, and the only “respite” she gets is the comfort of the pastoral environment:

Among the fields she breath’d again:  
The master-current of her brain  
Ran permanent and free,  
And to the pleasant Banks of Tone  
She took her way, to dwell alone  
Under the greenwood tree. (345–346)

She has been betrayed on the human level, yet the “gentle” natural world substitutes for the missing communion of the family: she finds a sense of belonging that she has lost. The final image of the ballad is that of the “hallow’d mold” of the grave and the embracing congregation of the faithful in the church, in which the continuum of the human and non-human worlds

reaches an ultimate climax. As in the earlier poems, the two worlds collide: the Wordsworthian vision presupposes a form of organic unity, in which the human element articulates and poetically liberates the life of non-human species, whereby the epistemological concept completes a full circle.

## [5] Conclusion

Ecocritical readings of literature provide an important impetus for our responsibility to the environment by drawing our attention to the different intellectual and aesthetic concepts of the environment and the interaction between the human element and the non-human world. Scientific reflection is informed by our ability to grasp and to reflect on the aesthetic and philosophical concepts of the period, and vice versa.

As we have seen in this study of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth attempted to restore a sense of a mutually beneficial relationship between human and non-human worlds by positing a continuum that defines the form and the subject matter of his poetry. His notion of “organic sensibility” can thus be understood not only as a theoretical and methodical approach “how to write poetry today”, but also as an epistemological framework to understand the “sweet lore that the nature brings”: a new self-definition of the human element defined by the gradually alienating urban landscape of a dramatically industrializing Britain at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries on the one hand, and the “poetic diction” of “belles lettres” on the other. As I have attempted to show, Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s “revolution” also involves a revolution in epistemology: knowledge and cognizance cannot be separated from the sensual experience of “nature” and the environment. Its fundamental element is participation, not domination. “Such a perspective may legitimately be termed an ecological view of the natural world, since their poetry consistently expresses a deep and abiding interest in the Earth as a dwelling-place for all living things. [...] the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge clearly foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a household, a dwelling-place for an interdependent biological community.” (McKusik 28–29)

If Haeckel defined ecology as a “science dealing with the relations of different organisms to their ‘environment’, which condition their existence”, Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* provide a literary version of the self-same concept: *humans are conditioned in their existence by the natural environment and the forms it provides*. This poetic ecology, based on the continuum of the human and non-human aspects of the environment, thus creates an important addendum to the scientific environmental consciousness, and so the pastoral reconciliation of nature with humanity cannot be understood as a nostalgic, escapist concept, as some authors seem to suggest.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is a moving invitation to think otherwise, and that makes this type of poetry more relevant now than ever.

## [Notes]

<sup>1</sup> “Unter Oecologie verstehen wir die gesamte Wissenschaft von den Beziehungen des Organismus zur umgebenden Außenwelt, wohin wir im weiteren Sinne alle Existenzbedingungen rechnen können.” Haeckel (*Allgemeine*), 286.

<sup>2</sup> Further on the topic Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, 36–37.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gerd Weigmann: “ErnstHaeckel –Vater der Ökologie“ (*Vordenker und Vorreiter der Ökobewegung: 40 ausgewählte Portraits*. Simonis, Udo E. (Hrsg.). Hirzel Verlag: Stuttgart: 2014; p. 25).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Haeckel, Ernst.: *Kunstformen der Natur*. (Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts: Berlin, Leipzig, 1900.)

<sup>5</sup> “Several of my Friends are anxious for the success of these Poems from a belief, that if the views, with which they were composed, were indeed realized, a class of Poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relations: and on this account they have advised me to prefix a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written. But I was unwilling to undertake the task, because I knew that on this occasion the Reader would look coldly upon my arguments, since I might be suspected of having been principally influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of reasoning him into an approbation of these particular Poems: and I was still more unwilling to undertake the task, because adequately to display my opinions and fully to enforce my arguments would require a space wholly disproportionate to the nature of a preface. For to treat the subject with the clearness and coherence, of which I believe it susceptible, it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved; which again could not be determined, without pointing out, in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other, and without retracing the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself. I have therefore altogether declined to enter regularly upon this defence; yet I am sensible, that there would be some impropriety in abruptly obtruding upon the Public, without a few words of introduction, Poems so materially different from those, upon which general approbation is at present bestowed.” *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800 (172).

<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion, see “A Language That Is Ever Green” (Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991; pp. 12–35).

<sup>7</sup> In his informative and illuminating book on Romantic ecology, James McKusick talks about a brand new epistemological approach to reality in the poetry of the early English Romantics: being exposed to reality weighs more than “boring, irrelevant book-learning”: “Indeed, it should be apparent to any reader of Wordsworth’s poetry that the main theme of the ‘Walking’ essay is largely indebted to such poems as ‘Expostulation and Reply’ and ‘The Tables Turned.’ Both of these poems develop a contrast between boring, irrelevant book-learning and the vital stimulus of meditative wandering in the natural world.” (McKusick 5).

<sup>8</sup> Dewey W. Hall in his insightful book *Romantic Naturalists, Early Environmentalists: An Ecocritical Study, 1789–1912* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2014) deals with the meaning of the “wreathes of smoke” in the pastoral landscape and, based on substantial historical evidence, explains it a sign of industrial production in the area (either of ironworks or of paper mills): “Wordsworth would have seen signs of industry during his tour while visiting Goodrich Castle, Tintern Abbey, and Chepstow Castle” (Hall 128).

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on this topic see Ashton 193.

<sup>10</sup> More on nostalgia and poetry as “the science of feelings” in Goodmann 208–209.

<sup>11</sup> “[...] Wordsworth and Thoreau had a tendency to hold the natural world at an arm's length in their aesthetic and philosophical contemplation of nature” (Tobin 59).

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# [ Displacement of the Western: (In)Authentic Locations in *Slow West* (2015) and *Jauja* (2014) ]

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**[Abstract]** *The Western, once the most American film genre relying on authentic American scenery, has become a genre devoid of this quintessential visual articulation of the frontier mythology (Kitses, Carmichael, McMahon, and Csaki). While in classical Westerns it was the American land and nature that allowed for the use of generic conventions such as the pioneering achievement, the Indian story, the outlaw story, with the background theme dichotomy of justice vs. revenge (Carmichael), the Western of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century<sup>1</sup> broadly disregards this traditional space and proposes locations that only seemingly substitute for the American scenery. This paper explores the use of such locations in two contemporary films – Jauja (2014) and Slow West (2015) – and the relevance of these locations in the context of the discussion about post-postmodern anxieties.*

**[Keywords]** *film, the Western, authenticity, post-postmodern, masculinity*

It would be strange to watch John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) or the *Searchers* (1956) without viewing the iconic images of the Monument Valley, or Red Mesa, USA. When watching a Western, one automatically expects to see the authentic American West that is very often manifested by the background country of Utah, Arizona, Colorado, or California. John Wayne would indeed appear less authentic, if not outright displaced, had he been surrounded by Canadian or Australian mountain ranges instead of internationally recognized natural monuments referring to the American experience of living in the frontier community.

This paper explores the use of locations in otherwise almost classic Westerns by looking into two contemporary films of, however, non-American or only partially American production – *Jauja* (2014) and *Slow West* (2015) – films that propose inauthentic locations and revise historical and spatial settings of the genre.<sup>2</sup> I intend to argue that such locations determined by their vastness, blurred boundaries and lack of political and/or social definitions reflect contemporary cultural demand for the universality of model representations with the emphasis on genuine and authentic expression.<sup>3</sup> This argument reflects contemporary discussions about the effects of postmodernity on an individual that have been developed in the works of Gilles Lipovetsky, Robert Samuels, or Alan Kirby, but most notably it refers to Zygmunt Bauman (2007) and his notion of 'liquid modernity' that he uses to characterize post-postmodern Western society. While in 'liquid times,' an individual is compelled to thought-out actions and conscious calculations generated by contemporary urban settings, the two selected films propose alternative settings. The authenticity that the characters in the two discussed films experience is triggered by the land/no-land, place/no-place, in which self-reliance and self-sufficiency are virtues and abilities much suppressed by anxieties generated by the conformity of 'liquid times' as Bauman suggests.

The American landscape was for more than several decades a central location for filming American western films. The classic era of the Western with films like *Shane* (1953), *Stagecoach* (1939), *High Noon* (1952) or the *Searchers* (1956) elaborated the concept of the films' setting – the land and location – to such an extent that the place the films visually represented and depicted became equally supportive of the narrative as the main protagonist. As Deborah Carmichael in her study of the presence of Monument Valley in John Ford's *Stagecoach* explains, the depiction of such locations became something of "a visual prototype for the genre" (212). Views of the original American West representing its most iconic monuments remain crucial for the articulation of the optimism rooted in the American mythology of the frontier the exploration of which defines the whole Western genre (Kitses, *Horizons West* 14). Moreover, despite the fact that prior to the popularization of the views of the American West by John Ford's films the Western was extensively shot in studios (Carmichael 217–218), it was upon viewing the original locations of the region that started complementing characters and narrative to narrative to tie the geography with, ultimately, its history. Carmichael refers to the words of Scott Eyman, John Ford's biographer, to affirm that the Great West as described in Manifest Destiny, is in the classic Western represented as the region where the triumph of man over nature takes place (214). Using locations such as the Colorado Plateau or the area of the Great Plains, the classic Western literally displays the living presence of American natural monuments to refer to the myth and to respond to the issues raised by the frontier while at the same time it uses the land and nature to explore and eventually celebrate heroic masculinity. Authentic images of the West were crucial for the construction of the myth of the frontier and the celebration of the hero who became the archetype for Western heroism that has endured throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (McVeigh 155–162). While

depicting internationally recognizable sites, the traditional narrative of the Western focuses on a strong central male character at odds with the community.

Concerning the Western as a genre, critics often stressed its openness, meaning the diversity of its forms that allowed for the deployment of the genre in different cultural environments.<sup>4</sup> One of Hollywood's most vibrant traditions the Western transcended its original location and, as a set of conventions, has been adopted by other national cinemas all around the world from Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), a Japanese celebration of the genre itself, to *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) – a Korean remake of Sergio Leone's epic spaghetti Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). As Jim Kitses explains, the Western is grounded in issues of American identity on both the national and individual levels, but its classic structure, stereotypes, and conflicts revolve around the essential binary opposition of wilderness and civilization, “a dialectical scheme with archetypal agents that make the transcendence possible” (*Horizons West* 13). While the individual connects with freedom, honor, self-knowledge, or integrity, nature is often the projection of experience, purity, savagery, but also pragmatism. Enriched by nature's characteristics, making self-sufficiency and self-reliance his dogmas, the main protagonist in the Western is confronted with institutions, restrictions, and social responsibilities that the community produces (Kitses, *Horizons West* 12).

*Jauja* and *Slow West* are also examples of this very contemporary transcendence of the genre. It is notably *Slow West* that seemingly provides a comparable setting to the hero to mimic historically and spatially American locations; however, as will be described, it is only a seeming attempt. In the case of *Jauja*, the notably different location is more prominent. Although it is never openly stated in the film, the reference to Peru or Peruvian landscape is quite strong, as the title of the film also suggests. However, despite this straightforward reference, the way the landscape is visually depicted and used to support the characterization of the hero makes its reference to any politically and geographically determined country less critical. It is the vastness and universality of the space that makes both films unique contributions to the contemporary Western as they are no longer bound to a specific region.

## [1] Slow West

*Slow West* is a romantic ballad produced in 2015, starring Michael Fassbender as Silas, the main male character – a lone hero, a wanderer, or an escapee who left a band of criminals to pursue his own personal interests and perhaps a more lawful way of life as he decides to accompany a young Scottish boy, Jay Cavendish, to help him in the search for his lost lover Rosa. The setting of the film is 19<sup>th</sup>-century frontier America, and the central theme is justice and revenge that encourages the traditional polarization of the characters into good and evil. It is, classically, the story of an outlaw, a reformed criminal, whose actions reclaim his reputation, and his self-reliance and self-sufficiency are eventually rewarded by what is commonly regarded as the highest prize – a woman. The story thus follows a very traditional narrative path to provide secure closure in the form of a restored status quo, where the hero demonstrates his moral authority and power and eventually becomes a husband and father.

The film narrative, however, features several surprising twists to shift the emphasis from the seemingly main character to the real hero (from Jay Cavendish to Silas). The transition can be read as a Jungian journey of a boy, who, by encountering obstacles, helpers, and other agents

grows into a man; the audience first learns about the purpose of the journey and the motivations of the young Jay, and only later on when Jay encounters his ‘second King’,<sup>5</sup> the supportive, authoritative, but still reluctant Silas, the narrative places all emphasis onto him to make him the real hero of the story. Silas is a lone character with no real purpose in his life, so when he encounters the young, innocent and well-mannered Jay, who demonstrates extraordinary determination to reach his goal, Silas joins him to gradually embrace that moral authority Jay possesses. The narrative makes the encounter inevitable for Silas’s journey to betterment, as he receives numerous opportunities to prove his loyalty to Jay and demonstrates his genuine interest in advancing his moral authority, and continues to help the boy at his own expense (e.g. when Silas saves the young Jay after he had left him to pursue his goal alone, but was tricked and robbed by a stranger). Together with his physical strength that helps both the men overcome real obstacles and survive several bandit attacks, Silas manifests a combination of qualities that prove not only efficient for survival but also crucial to eventually determine his location (find his place on earth). As Kitses defines, it is the agency and action, his transcendental character, that make the Western hero the defender of family and community (“All That” 27). The tragic death of Jay, Silas’s successful journey marked by his transformation, and the final reward in the figure of Rose – the girl Jay had been looking for – as well as the children that he seems to ‘pick up’ along the journey and suggest they all have become a family, all this advances the preoccupation of the narrative with the demonstration, if not outright celebration, of the prevailing post-feminist model masculinity<sup>6</sup> aimed at contemporary Western men.

What is, nevertheless, specific about this Western, is how it regards its locations; not just real filming locations, but also those idealized locations that are supposed to represent the American landscape and support the idea of the American wilderness in contrast to the frontier community. When it comes to the setting itself, it is interesting to observe that the historical setting prevails over the geographical one. Except for a few scenes that depict wild nature by presenting scenery, Americanness is mainly demonstrated via characters – from the main character through the band of criminals to the encounter of what has been left from the battlefield with Indian Americans. The only scenic portrayal of the American landscape comes during the very last scene with the depiction of a wooden house, the style of which very strongly resembles the architecture of the frontier community. In this house, or rather, in the fields around the house, the hero accomplishes his goal that is both a social and moral good as he manages to protect his family from bandits and criminals.

Traditionally, in the grand Western, towns, houses, farms, or objects related to life in a community would be deployed by the narrative to suggest a restriction of the hero’s freedom, repression or even impotence (Kitses, “All That” 25). The vastness of the specific landscape of American plains or deserts thus confronted this repression by providing infinite land and the freedom the hero eventually sought and escaped to. The cabin in *Slow West*, however, does not function as a restriction of the hero’s freedom, or impotence, but rather the very opposite; it is the promise of the final location where he encounters and embraces his wife and children. The hero claims the location as the family becomes his final destination.

Regarding the scenery and locations in which this film takes place, the film does not even try to mimic the American landscape. It provides vistas of a country that does not have to be defined geographically because the narrative benefits from its historical designation that is much more significant. The country and the affiliation of the hero to the country no longer matters or does not matter as much as the characterization of the male hero in search of his location

in contemporary society. Silas's character reflects Zygmunt Bauman's characterization of the vagabond whom he historically places to the pre-modern period, accusing him of being a curse to modernity by "being masterless (out of control, out of frame, on the loose)" and a reason behind the grand search for new, state-managed order in the Victorian period ("From Pilgrim" 28). Silas resembles Bauman's vagabond by being unpredictable, having "no set destination" (28) apart from the one the narrative makes him adopt to eventually fulfill the convention of strong closures. But the fact that the real filming location of the *Slow West* was New Zealand, and that the film makes this different geographical location evident, only adds to the emphasis of Silas's wandering nature, of a life on the move to escape locally based control. Bauman further suggests that postmodernity "reversed the ratio" of the proportion of the displaced, from fewer vagabonds earlier to the contemporary state where there are more vagabonds than those who are "forever settled" because they too "wake up to find the places (in the land, places in society and places in life)" (29). Like the vagabond, Silas has no places to which he could belong, because such places ceased to be accommodating for contemporary Western men (29).

The emphasis that shifts from the authenticity of the location and history, once triggered by the most authentic location of the American West, to the authenticity and intensity of man (self), now triggered by the inauthentic landscape, is evident in this film. Nature or wilderness here has a protective function, and it serves as a habitat for the hero and characters in which they undergo a cleansing process once the community proves fatal or corrupt.<sup>7</sup> When they leave the community, they prosper along the frontier, which is demonstrated primarily by Silas's reformed character. Also, even though in the company of Jay, Silas remains a reluctant Western hero, which is typically represented by the lack of speech, his occasional departures from Jay to stay alone, and agency when he refuses to explain his further actions that take Jay by surprise.

In this setting, one of the most typical qualities of the Western hero is self-reliance. This is a quality that only lone characters can prove, and one that leads to the process of self-acceptance. As Den Uyl points out, self-reliance is not an action performed as a result of isolation from others, but in the Western, it is an action willing to be separated from others. If there is no other way to remain faithful to oneself, the hero must be separated from the community (47). The hero is alone because there are no real companions for him; thus, he is driven by the pursuit of self-acceptance. *Slow West* uses its ingenuine geographical location and landscape to emphasize this pursuit by providing ground for the character to fully demonstrate his authenticity in relation to what can be understood as universal. Wilderness is a space that is most authentic because it is the most original, genuine space for life, precisely because it is not defined by boundaries established by society. As if this space was a metaphor of the 'going-back-to-the-roots' process because encountering one's real roots means confronting and exercising one's authenticity.

Knight and McKnight suggest that Westerns heavily rely upon generic formulas, but they too provide the opportunity to study current and historical perspectives on the role of nature in nation-building (2010). What *Slow West*, however, is proposing via the emphasis on nature and wilderness in its narrative, is that perhaps the concept of national location, in this case, Americanness, or Westernness, does not have to be defined by its geographical location. With the emphasis on man, his specific geographical location loses importance in the context of recent post-postmodern debate. The critical designation of the space seems to be a wilderness, far from "the urban space that has become physically close but socially and economically distant" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 73). In other words, Silas seems to represent contemporary men affected by the ingenuity of space. Once, as Bauman, Lipovetsky or Kirby propose, postmodern

men began to be affected by anxieties generated by the intensity of the post-postmodern world, inflicted by extraterritorial realities experienced in the urban setting “achieved through, manifested in and sustained by means of virtual connectedness” (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 73), the truly original and authentic space without socially established boundaries becomes their alternative. Also, as Bauman proposes, vast area poses no restrictions on the limits of segregation; therefore, no spatial segregation is needed, and lines thus disappear (*Liquid Times* 73). And this is how *Slow West* treats its geographical setting, in reference to the coded aesthetics that promises freedom, openness, redemption, and reinvention but stripped of the American pathos to offer universal model masculinity that embraces post-feminist characterization.

## [2] Jauja

*Jauja* is a film that is even more universalistic in the proposal of the masculine model, yet more straightforward in its disregard of physical space or geographical region. *Jauja*, an art-house Western as many reviewers labeled it, was produced in 2014 and was presented as an auteur film by Lisandro Alonso. The central theme that the story develops is the search of a lost (kidnapped) daughter following a similar narrative development as the famous *Searchers* (Ford 1956). The surface structure of the film suggests the justice and revenge theme as Gunnar Diensen, the main male character (played by Viggo Mortensen) pursues the alleged abductor of his daughter. The film is also partially preoccupied with topics such as pioneer achievement demonstrated by the status of Gunnar Diensen, a Danish explorer, whose clear intentions to establish a company in this country were the primary motivation for his exploratory voyages into this part of the world. However, further business intentions are not revealed in the film as the father abandons the known territory to pursue the lost daughter into “the land of unknowingness” (Atkinson 52). The story also seems to touch on the topic of the Indigenous story, which in the grand Western is carried out by the deployment of Native American characters commonly represented in a rigidly binary fashion.<sup>8</sup> What is, however, significant for this film too, is the way it treats its locations. Despite the straightforward hint given in its title, the location seems even less clear than the location in *Slow West*. The epigraph introducing *Jauja* at the Cannes festival also proposes a very blurred concept of its setting: “[...] *Jauja* was a mythological land of abundance and happiness... People were undoubtedly exaggerating, as they usually do. The only thing that is known for certain is that all who tried to find this earthly paradise got lost on the way” (*Festival*).

Similarly to *Slow West*, *Jauja*’s historical setting is the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the specific historical period remains unclear, the clothing and historical setting suggest a similar location, so, too, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century country, but the country itself is never openly identified. From the language that is used in the film – most of the time it is Spanish, but also Danish and English – and from the depiction of the natives the audience can assume it is one of the South American countries (and as the title of the film suggests it is very probably Peru). Also, as we learn from several interviews with Lisandro Alonso, the original intention was to place an English explorer in the South American setting to refer to Anglo-Argentinian history, but this initial attempt was abandoned for a Danish character, and specifically for Viggo Mortensen, as the Danes had no colonial aspirations in this region (Atkinson 52). Therefore, the reference to a dreamlike, and historically, geographically and politically unidentified country is evident as Alonso decides for a historically inaccurate combination to fictionalize the story even more. The choice of language

in the film also suggests the attempt for a dreamlike quality of the film. The use of an “exotic language”<sup>9</sup> such as Danish, in a South American setting indeed contributes to the confusing identification of the setting.

The film, among many other countries, co-produced also by Denmark, demonstrates very strong existential features typical for Scandinavian cinematography, which becomes evident during the second half of the film as the search for the lost daughter turns into explorations into the self. Intensified by this unidentifiable land that is presented onto the viewers as an unknown desert existing outside the realm of civilization, as a land beyond time, the narrative soon turns its sole emphasis onto the lone and isolated character, Gunnar Dinesen, and his struggle to re-define his existence as he is trying to reconcile with his lost daughter.

The way *Jauja* regards its physical setting – space and location – is more unconventional concerning existential influences of Scandinavian cinematography. The vast emptiness that surrounds the hero most of the time transforms in the second half of the film into a genuinely unidentifiable land not only outside the realm of civilization but also outside the realm of one’s understanding of geographical location. However, with this transformation into a limitless (both spatially and temporarily) space, the hero enters a world in which civilization loses its protective function to experience the intensity and authenticity of the self. Similarly to the cowboy, who in the grand Western seeks a transformative experience in the desert-like or mountainous region that surrounds him, Gunnar also enters this absurd space to re-define himself. This space, thus, similarly as in *Slow West*, functions as an instigator, or an arena. Once Gunnar understands that he has lost track of his daughter, he also understands he has lost track of his own location and is further driven only by the pursuit of self-acceptance.

Similarly to *Slow West*, Gunnar is alone because there are no companions for him. The only companion he had, his daughter, has left him and thus the social location that has up to now been that of fatherhood (parenthood) no longer matters. With this unlimited environment and unidentifiable locations that *Jauja* proposes, the film also presents an alternative setting to contemporary urban locations. In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world that is “increasingly shaped and reshaped by global processes,” where “increasingly local politics” (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 83) takes place, *Jauja* proposes the environment without limits, but which, perhaps paradoxically generates greater authenticity than the reality. Bauman echoes the words of Edmond Jabés, when he states that one “do[es] not go to the desert to find identity but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous... And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak” (“From Pilgrim” 20). Because the desert, or wilderness, is the “primal and bottom-line freedom” characteristic for the absence of bounds (20). So when Gunnar loses the sense of belonging to a location, becoming socially homeless, he is forced to experience the intensity of authenticity of being, to experience freedom without boundaries whether historical, geographical or social.

A particular feature of all of Alonso’s films is that they are extremely quiet. *Jauja* is one of those few films that include dialogue, and when the director was approached to explain why he abandons dialogue in his films, he replied that he did not think humans communicate well (Lambert). The author of the question also concludes his interview by agreeing with Alonso that “in our present age when everyone has to be ‘connected’ all the time, doing more than one thing – the chatter, the noise, can be maddening. Encountering the work of Lisandro Alonso makes me recall the feeling of lying on the floor and listening to a record as a teenager: not texting or talking or answering emails, simply listening” (Lambert). The universe that Alonso proposes creates a direct alternative to the “maddening” realities of contemporary western society.

### [3] Conclusion

The location of both of the stories is defined by the confinement from civilization, even temporarily as in the case of *Slow West*, and the characteristic features of both heroes – reluctance, loneliness, social impotence demonstrated by the at times complete absence of speech – suggest qualities that are, according to Lipovetsky, demonstrations of how postmodernism and its economic intensification of the power of the market and consumerism influence individuals.<sup>10</sup> This intensification, as Lipovetsky elaborates, is a demonstration of the ‘hyper’ era that he suggests is a successor of the postmodern age in which individuals find themselves under the pressure of the need to be flexible, to react, to be permanently prepared to change (Lipovetsky 160). But more than that, individuals are affected by the pleasure associated with change, “the desire to intensify and reintensify the course of daily life” that results in an endless cycle of emotional rejuvenating experiences generated by hyper-consumption (Lipovetsky 164). This focus on consumerism, as Lipovetsky further explains, generates extreme forms of individualism where pathological problems, psychological disturbances, and excessive behavior are the most common demonstrations of the pursuit (or maximization) of interests in most spheres of life (that is education, sexuality, religion, politics, etc.). As Bauman also contributes, it is the fragmentariness and discontinuity of postmodern relationships along with the narrowness of focus and purpose, and shallowness of contact that spur contemporary demand for a truly authentic encounter with life within the realm of individual experience (“From Pilgrim” 34).

The journey of both the heroes – Silas, as well as Gunnar Diensen – is defined by the escape of civilization into the wilderness as they lose connection to the geographical location, they become wanderers due to the inability to find places to which they could belong and would prove accommodating. While the setting in *Slow West* is pre-defined as a generic formula, the lack of definition of location in *Jauja* allows for greater explorations into the interaction of an individual with the setting; but both the locations predestine the heroes to long to find their roots and history. Silas’s confrontation with his own past results in the regeneration of moral values and authority that serves as a form of rehabilitation of the Western man in society once he enters the cabin and encounters his wife and children towards the end of the story. Gunnar’s confrontation with the past, or rather with the self, takes place in a cave in the middle of nowhere, in which he happens to confront the future (which is the moment in the narrative when absurdity starts prevailing over realism). In both cases, be it the wild forest or a land/no land signifies the demand to return to the most authentic – original – space, which is a feature that Lipovetsky identifies as a result of the impact of hypermodernism (165). The heroes search for the most original space once the urban setting has become space – physically close but socially and economically distant (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 73).

While *Slow West* is more conventional in the use of wilderness and nature, assuming the victory of men over nature, where nature takes the function of a transformative experience through which the hero manages to restore the status quo and find his location, *Jauja* is much more unconventional. The film leaves the hero stranded in a land/no land, where wilderness becomes a hideout when civilization loses its protective function. This is the arena in which the authenticity of the self is more relevant than the authenticity of the location. These two contemporary Westerns seem to explore archetypal and existential aspects of the frontier, but do not tie this experience to a specific point in American history, hence making it more universal, adjustable to the current demands of the main protagonists.<sup>11</sup> The region of the West once

so omnipresent in the grand Western is in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century also abandoned as the myth of the frontier is no longer viable, simply because it ceased to be an issue ever since the new frontier became Vietnam, the American government, or the family that brought forward a different kind of cowboy.<sup>12</sup> Influenced by movements challenging the position of man in society, the cowboy experiences the return on screen, but with a slightly different destiny than that of the national. The focus is, under the influence of postfeminism, on the destiny of man when the wilderness becomes his escape or hideout from the community (society) – space where authenticity is experienced and exercised. This form of experience in American cinema proves to have a healing effect on the contemporary hero, and if not healing, then definitely cleansing.<sup>13</sup>

## [Notes]

<sup>1</sup> Neo-Western, or post-Western are also terms that describe the continuation of the Western genre in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Both refer to the revival and extension of the set of conventions that the classic Western established. However, in this essay, I prefer to use the term 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western to suggest a shift in the emphasis that may also be a result of a broader tendency in American cinema.

<sup>2</sup> The topic of (in)genuine locations in relation to these two specific films – *Slow West* and *Jauja* – caught my attention during a conference focused on Space, Place, and Location, and which allowed me to consider the aspect of the Western genre that I had previously disregarded – its location. It also allowed me to have a closer look at these two specific films that I would not otherwise consider in relation to the study of the American Western, precisely because these films are and are not American at the same time. It is, therefore, the use, or rather disregard, of genuine location, space, land, country, and the focus on its alternative setting concerning these two specific films that is in my interest in this essay. It is also a preliminary exploration of what hopefully becomes a more extensive study of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century American Western films.

<sup>3</sup> The term authenticity is used in this essay to refer to originality. In reference to land it is used to describe real locations of American territories that became quintessential for the depiction of the West in American cinema. The term is, however, also used to refer to the authenticity of experience described by Zygmunt Bauman in his essay *From Pilgrim to Tourist* (2011) as the encounter of “primal, bottom-line freedom” (20), which suggests the kind of experience unrestricted by the social norms of modern life. It can be argued that the concept of authenticity in the light of postmodern debate loses its significance, however, it is not the intention of this essay to investigate the concept itself and its position in contemporary postmillennial discussion about cultural products, but the focus is solely on the shift from the emphasis on authentic locations to what is proposed by Gilles Lipovetsky, Zygmunt Bauman and Allan Kirby, among others, the experience of life outside the realm of postmodernity.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Kitses in *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* outlines how the Western obtained “greater openness and diversity in a multicultural, post-modern era” (3).

<sup>5</sup> The term second king is used to refer to a character who, in Jungian interpretation, takes the place of an absent father and temporarily substitutes for his authority. The main function of the second king is to motivate courage and enhance moral qualities to further action and agency of the boy. Interestingly, in *Slow West*, the boy seems to be Silas, the man in the story, who is highly influenced by the moral qualities of Jay, who never gets the chance to mature into a man.

<sup>6</sup> The model of masculinity influenced mainly by the second wave of feminism, where men are featured as nurturers, associated with family and family-relations. For more on this see e.g., Bruzzi Stella, *Bringing up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Hollywood*. London: BFI, 2006; or Faludi Susan, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Corruption of society is demonstrated explicitly by the reason Rose had to flee Scotland for America as she was involved in the accidental killing of a lord in self-defense from sexual assault. She escapes, but there is a reward announced for her capture. Wild territories along the American frontier thus present a hideout from the corrupted society that no longer protects the innocent and punishes villains, but it is the innocent who get punished and villains who are protected and rewarded.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Slotkin examines the place of Native American characters in the American narrative in psychological terms as a symbol of the American libido, where the libido is the “source of creative, life energy and power in and over the natural wilderness” (560). In many classic but also post-classical Western films the presence and use of Native American characters could be interpreted in these terms, though with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western, this seems to be less appropriate of an interpretation as the Native American element ceases to be represented within the rigid boundaries of the Other.

<sup>9</sup> Alonso, in an interview in 2015, explained that he favors the dreamlike quality in the film. To have the majority of the dialogue in the film in Danish was, according to Alonso, appealing because “no one speaks the language”. Viggo Mortensen, who also participated in the interview, corrected him by reminding that “five million people do”, to which Alonso replied that they are all in Denmark. The full interview is available in *In These Times*. (Atkinson Michael, “We are Not in Denmark Anymore”, *In These Times* [April 2015]: 52).

<sup>10</sup> For further information, see Gilles Lipovetsky, *Time Against Time, or The Hypermodern Society*. In *Supplanting the Postmodern*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> There is already a body of Western films produced primarily during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century that seem to be preoccupied with the Western hero and his commitments to parenting, or some kind of parent/child relationship, which suggests the emphasis on the representation of the man as a nurturer, and which also demonstrates the engagement of the narrative to deal with the inner struggles of the hero. Some of these films are for example *The Rider* (Zhao 2017), *Hell or High Water* (Mackenzie 2016), *The Revenant* (Inarritu 2015), or *Django Unchained* (Tarantino 2012).

<sup>12</sup> New model representations of the American man that succeeded the cowboy were notable, especially during the Reaganite era when the cult of the body was evident. With films like *Rambo*, the man ostensibly displays his physical qualities that prevail over the intellectual ones. Further decades brought forward many other more or less intellectually struggling men as they tried to defeat internal threats to society, or re-establish their position in the family.

<sup>13</sup> This cleansing effect of nature was best represented in *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2005), a film in which nature and wilderness is literally a hideout from social restraints and repression, and space where the American cowboy experiences real-life intensity denied to him by the community. At the same time, the film seems to disregard the importance of the geographical location on the authentic American experience that the cowboy conveys.

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**[ book  
reviews ]**



**Ambrosch Gerfried**  
**[*The Poetry of Punk: The***  
***Meaning Behind Punk Rock***  
***and Hardcore Lyrics*]**  
**New York: Routledge, 2018**

One is hard-pressed to think of a genre or field of study in which even the most straightforward and simple description of the content of a monograph can evoke feelings of aversion, foreboding, and even dread among a cross-section of the potential readership. *The Poetry of Punk: The Meaning behind Punk Rock and Hardcore Lyrics* by Gerfried Ambrosch does just this. First comes the consternation felt at the possibility of the volume having been written by an intrigued and well-meaning academic who has recently discovered the genre, and has chosen to explore this “unfamiliar” area. At the same time, one is confronted with the fear that it has been written by a “punk scholar” – perhaps even more dread-inducing, since no one can possibly understand punk as well as you do, and let’s face it, no one really understands it anyway. Right?

Ambrosch addresses these apprehensions, appropriately, at the very beginning. In the introduction he offers several key frames – punk’s non-monolithic, multi-faceted nature, the perennial balkanization of the punk community – and he cites Dunn’s (2009) analogy of a flag (evoking passion, lacking universal shared meanings) to lay the ground for explaining the nature of the topic’s subjectivity (1). The author’s argument is that song lyrics, having the formal properties of poetry, can be analyzed like poems, and the purpose of the book is to investigate the nature of (a selection of) lyrics by bands subscribing to punk and hardcore. The book goes far beyond this, exploring the “ideology” of punk and historical aspects of the emergence and development of punk and hardcore in “Anglophone” countries

(limited to the United Kingdom, the United States, and to a fleeting extent, Canada).

The International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), in their call for papers for the Punk Pedagogies Symposium held in July of 2019, noted rising numbers of educators coming from punk backgrounds in higher education. Others have noted punk’s emergence as a vital presence in academia, not only as a subject of study, but as a way of processing the world (Hsu 289). This volume reflects these observations, and in balancing between literature studies, popular culture and cultural studies, it serves as another contemporary contribution bringing important, alternative voices to the study of literature and culture. The author holds a doctorate in English and American studies from the University of Graz, and the short bio contained within the book suggests he is not currently affiliated with any institution. He notes in the introduction his involvement in the punk scene and suggests that it should be seen not as causing bias, but rather as an asset (3).

The book consists of five chapters plus an introduction and a foreword. In terms of methodological approach, the author undertook 17 interviews with musicians and other members of the punk community (e.g. Jon Active of Active Distribution). Lyrical meaning is examined non-systematically using a variety of basic approaches such as intent, structure, tropes, texture, intertextuality, levels of communication (the role of poetic voice), register, figures of repetition, and form-content relations. The book is divided thematically, with the first two chapters focusing on definitions and methodology. After in-depth discursive reviews of definitions of both punk and poetry, the second chapter examines the particular nature of punk lyrics, from their vocalization to anatomical aspects, and serves to highlight the aims, approaches and impact of lyrics in punk songs. The focus then progresses in the third chapter to attempts to pinpoint major

themes in punk lyrics, exploring anarchy, anti-capitalism and DIY, religion, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, vegetarianism and animal rights. The author uses a variety of examples ranging from early DIY bands such as Crass and Black Flag, to middle-ground indie punk bands with major label ties (Bad Religion, Propagandhi), to globally successful, major label affiliated bands (Sex Pistols, The Smiths). The final two chapters add contextual analysis, featuring histories of UK and American punk (with minor references to Canada), and various iconic lyrical highlights.

The most substantial contribution of the book arguably lies in the first two chapters, the first of which is dedicated to defining the two major aspects of the volume, punk and poetry. Whereas in many subjects operational definitions are more or less mechanical, and rightfully so, the subject of punk demands a much deeper and more sensitive discussion, and the author obliges. The result is a quite remarkable attempt at defining punk in the first half of chapter one, skillfully citing noted punk figures (e.g. Penny Rimbaud, Ian MacKaye), movements (Dadaism, The Situationist International, Camp Art), and authors (Sontag 1964, Marcus 1989, O'Hara 1999); the outcome is easily imaginable as a definitive, stand-alone essay. The complexities of defining punk, a phenomenon less than half a century old, and notorious for causing disagreement on even its most basic characteristics, make the task of defining poetry, the subject of countless discussions over centuries, somewhat pale in its shadow. Nevertheless, the initial chapter prepares the reader for one of the author's main arguments, namely that punk culture cannot be understood without an examination of its poetry: song lyrics (21). The second chapter, as the author effortlessly guides the non-expert reader through basic poetic structures, convincingly engages the reader with the application of theory to non-literary works.

A surely confounding question that arises when carrying out a study like this is what samples to choose. From the plethora of records related to punk and hardcore, the question is a daunting one – especially when the author is close to the subject, as the author of this title notes that he is. The declared criteria for sample selection are stated as being twofold; “relevance and representativeness” (1). This seems to be a rather thin framework to say the least, and it opens the door to the questioning of the author's choices. For example, are The Smiths and Morrissey relevant and representative of punk and hardcore to the extent that they deserve multiple pages of content dedicated to them? Is the statement “many punk bands name the iconic singer as an influence” (125) a sufficient criterion? The same goes for Catharsis, referred to regularly throughout the book, and the subject of an almost ten-page analysis in the final chapter. Is Catharsis truly that representative of almost five decades of punk and hardcore lyrics?

Taking ‘representation’ from another perspective, the final chapter is curiously entitled “A History of North American Punk Rock and Hardcore,” yet only one single reference is made to a Canadian-based band, and no cultural references related to Canada are discussed at all. It seems it would make much more sense to use a more fitting frame by dropping the “North American” niceties, and replacing Propagandhi with an influential American political hardcore band (MDC comes immediately to mind, among many others).

As the book progresses, it becomes increasingly heavy on punk history, with lyrical analysis becoming secondary. A number of the stories related are legends of the genre – Ian MacKaye accidentally creating a movement (straight edge), the emergence of punk with the Stooges, New York Dolls and Ramones in the USA, the Sex Pistols in the UK, Dial House and the emergence of anarchopunk, the influence of Dead Kennedys, the Bad Brains and

homophobia... the list goes on. Although the point of the author seems to be to emphasize the lyrical value connected to historical moments in punk, one has to wonder if it is really necessary to tell these stories again, with them already being the subject of dozens of biographies, informal studies, documentaries, fanzines, films, etc. The question may again be who the book is intended for: if the book were about the lyrics of modern American country and western music, I personally would appreciate the context and legends, knowing little of the genre. However, in the context of what the author says at the outset, that the book should be of interest to anyone who “identifies with punk, or moves in punk circles” (2), it seems that for the intended audience the historically focused chapters would likely be mostly redundant. It begs the question of why the author chose such ‘famous’ moments and players, and not more under-the-radar, but arguably more essential players and ‘historical’ events.

The description of themes (or “ideology”) in punk presented in chapter three involves recognizable patterns, calling to mind, yet expanding upon, the often cited yet empirically lacking book *Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise* (O’Hara 1989). However, a different question seems to be begging to be answered here: why were (and are) such diverse people brought together under these “ideologies”? The highly educated, high school drop-outs, nerds, jocks, the abused: What is it in punk and hardcore lyrics that attracts such a diverse audience to these ideologies in particular? Perhaps this could be the subject of a further study.

In terms of style, the language and register is sovereign and convincing. However, the book is desperately missing a conclusion to tie the arguments together, a trend that follows on from chapters 3, 4 and 5. Summarizing the points made in chapters makes for more persuasive reading, particularly at the end.

Especially in light of the fact that the book is divided thematically, a concluding chapter tying the three directions together would have resulted in a much more convincing read.

When reading this book, two personal memories of punk and poetry came to mind. One was from a 12<sup>th</sup>-grade English class, and the disgust of a pair of classmates upon learning that I had scored a top grade on an extended poetic analysis paper: they had been discussing “real” poetry, I was examining “mere” punk lyrics. This repeated itself in a third-year Bachelor-level Sociolinguistics class. Earning an ‘A’ grade on a paper based on an analysis of Exploited, Crass and Subhumans lyrics turned out to be a pivotal moment in my education: the concerns that I had about society, many of which I had been introduced to by punk and hardcore lyrics, were recognized as important, serious and worthy of discussion by my professor. In light of these experiences, if *The Poetry of Punk: The Meaning Behind Punk Rock and Hardcore Lyrics* contributes in a similar way to opening doors to the discussion of alternative perspectives on society and culture for others, then Ambrosch’s contribution to the literature is an important one.

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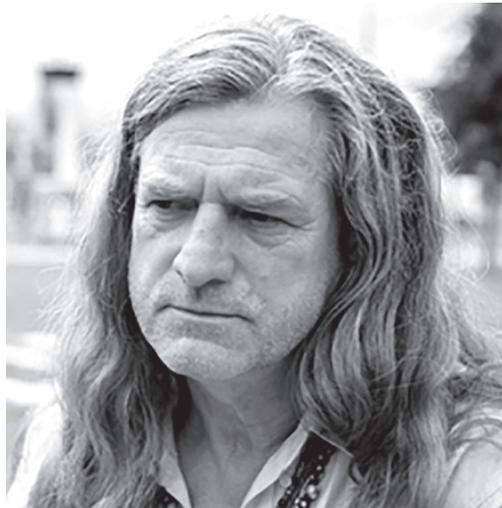


**[ news,  
announcements ]**



## [ Visit by the Hungarian American Poet Gábor Gyukics ]

On 18<sup>th</sup> October 2019, the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Ostrava hosted a special guest – the Hungarian-American poet Gábor Gyukics – who delivered a lecture on contemporary American poetry and recent Native American poets. Gábor Gyukics was born in Hungary in 1958, and in 1986 he emigrated to the Netherlands for political reasons. Two years later he moved to the United States, where he lived in St. Louis, San Francisco, and New York City. He moved back to Hungary in 2002. He presently lives in Szeged. As a poet and freelance literary translator, he has published collections of his poetry in Hungarian and English as well as translating American poetry into Hungarian and vice versa. Inspired by the San Francisco literary scene, Gyukics has introduced open poetry readings (accompanied with jazz music) to Hungary. He has also edited an anthology of contemporary American poetry (published in Hungary). This year, a volume of his poetry has been published in the Czech Republic (translated by Robert Svoboda) under the title *Čí je ta tvář a jiné básně* (Ostrava, Protimluv). The Ostrava Journal of English Philology has the author's permission to publish a few of his poems.



(photo: author's archive)

## [Poems by Gábor Gyukics]

### conjecture

silence slightly opens  
gives room for the sounds  
fussing around

as soon as the sounds enter  
they stop fussing  
become one with  
silence

the sounds stuck outside  
knock together  
waiting for silence  
to open again

### not on her own

with lowered wings  
the wind appeared  
she didn't blow anyone's hair  
didn't flutter the leaves on the trees

she swayed beyond the fence  
in the early sunset  
camouflaged herself as a reflection  
as if she couldn't decide  
whether she wanted to be sensed or seen

she jumped over the fence a few times  
looked around  
and before an outside force  
flew her away  
she ran a fast round  
leaving her scent behind

**totem**

the skyscrapers on the streets  
with Indian names  
aren't occupied by first nation people  
rather by window washers  
and security contractors  
they are the twelve-tone technique of the scale

occasionally  
one can hear  
the breathing of invisible Indians  
and smell the scent of earth  
scattered on the asphalt  
from their moccasins  
in the cities

**after the last one**

he lowers the boom gate  
  
steps between the tracks  
stares at the landscape  
above the contact area of the tracks  
moves backwards  
as if something were approaching  
but it's only a flash of light

he raises the boom gate

hangs his hat  
on the cranker  
next to his epaulettes

contemporary human trash  
covers the railroad gravels  
he stands above them

no more train is coming

**cemetery at River Savannah**

leaning to the oyster brick fence  
watching  
as ants order ants to labor  
you seem to perceive  
whips in their forearms

you won't talk about the place  
you 've visited in your dream  
to anyone

with prewritten answers  
you ignore the questioners

you smooth your forehead  
the peeling of your skin  
is wind blown dust

under the moonless sky  
your shadow walks the sun  
to the other side



