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Literature as an Art Form

Evolving Intermedial Literary Landscape

Edited by Asunción López-Varela Azcárate



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- Evolving Intermedial
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Preface

Whether sculpted through sacred text and oral performance, embedded in the visual codex of illuminated manuscripts, or reimagined through algorithmic configurations in digital media, literature has constantly evolved in tandem with the forms and technologies that mediate human expression. This anthology, *Literature as an Art Form – Evolving Intermedial Literary Landscape*, assembles sixteen scholarly contributions that collectively illuminate the dynamic interplay between literature and various artistic, cultural, and technological domains. The different chapters trace how literature interacts with, metamorphoses and is transformed by other media, artistic forms, and technologies. Each chapter investigates these transfigurations across diverse temporal, cultural, and medial contexts, revealing literature not as a static category, but as a mutable, permeable, and evolving cultural phenomenon.

From theoretical and historical inquiries across various medial formats, the contributions highlight the deep entwinement of literature with other semiotic systems. At the core of the anthology lies the conviction that the intermedial literary landscape is one of porous borders and recursive influences, where textuality meets spatiotemporal contexts as well as other modalities like image or sound and, more recently, algorithmic code. Each chapter in this collection explores a unique node within this intricate network; yet taken together, they build a compelling argument for literature as an intermedial artistic phenomenon; a process of becoming rather than a fixed form.

In the opening chapter, “Techno-Poiesis and Intermedial Semiosis in David O’Reilly’s Videogame *Everything*”, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate adopts a semiotic approach to elucidate how O’Reilly’s videogame transcends conventional narratives fostering a techno-poetic consciousness that blurs the dichotomy between the natural and the artificial. The game’s capacity for spatiotemporal scale traversal becomes an epistemological device, inviting players to reflect on their ontological positioning within a universe and engendering a relational understanding of existence. This perspective sets the tone for an overarching inquiry into how literature as an art form, refracted through other media, becomes a site for philosophical and ideological reflection. In this way, the study provides an instance of “techno-poiesis”, a making that is simultaneously technological and poetic, offering a fitting prelude to a broader discussion of intermedial semiosis that informs this collection.

Nicoleta Popa Blanariu’s “CompLit in the Era of CompMedia: Renewing the Concept of Invariant for a New Comparative Approach” introduces the concept of “transmedial invariants,” subdivided into discursive and thematic categories. By identifying these constants that manifest across various arts and media, the author proposes a multisystemic and translanguistic comparatism. The idea posits that there would be certain constants, mythic motifs, narrative structures and symbolic patterns that persist across artistic and medial communicative modalities, thus facilitating the analysis of artistic phenomena beyond the constraints of specific media boundaries. This interartistic approach highlights the interconnectedness of cultural expressions

and the persistence of meaning across formats. Thus, under this framework, whether through mythic refiguration, technological mediation, or performance-based intermediality, the studies collected in this volume would reveal literature's capacity to absorb, transform, and respond to the pressures and potentials of other modes of artistic expression.

The following chapter exemplifies how literary forms can draw upon and be transformed by visual, subconscious, and performative registers. Ovidiu Morar's contribution, "The Surrealist Language: Principles and Techniques", unpacks the aesthetic and linguistic foundations of Surrealism. Drawing from André Breton's manifestos, Morar outlines how Surrealist texts sought to bypass rational cognition by tapping into the unconscious through automatic writing, visual montage, and other techniques that blur the line between poetry and visual art. His study highlights how Surrealism's linguistic experiments marked a radical rethinking of literature's boundaries with other expressive forms.

Continuing this interrogation of literary boundaries brought about by the avant-gardes, Lilach Naishtat's examination of the fragment furthers the discussion by exploring a formal strategy that similarly resists closure and embraces indeterminacy across both literary and intermedial contexts. In "Fragment as Technique: The History of the Literary Fragment", Naishtat reframes the fragment not as a remnant of an incomplete whole, but as an intentional literary device that transcends period or genre through its ability to suggest multiplicity, provoke ambiguity, and resist closure. When situated within a broader intermedial frame, the fragment also signifies the tension between media completeness and literary openness.

Naishtat's emphasis on reception and the reader's role in actualising the text brings readers to Anne Holm's "Deixis in Digital Poetry: Momentariness as Orientation in Ian Hatcher's *Attentions*." Holm draws on Ronald W. Langacker's cognitive grammar and Lars Elleström's media theory to explore how Hatcher's digital poetry leverages deictic cues, small but potent markers of spatiotemporal orientation like "here" or "now", to create intersubjective presence in asynchronous environments. The study suggests that the momentariness fragmentation of digital reading experiences requires new poetic strategies, revealing how literature not only adapts to its media environments, but also reshapes them from within.

This tension between media completeness and literary openness prepares the ground for subsequent analyses that examine how literature strategically negotiates its form and affective power in dialogue with other arts and emerging technologies. By turning to the algorithmic poetics of digital literature, Beate Schirrmacher's essay "The Digital Transformation of Literature: Intermediality and Poetic Experience in the Digital Artwork *Evolution* (2014)" extends the logic of the fragment and avant-garde experimentation into contemporary terrain, presenting a detailed case study of the poetic-digital artwork by Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson. Schirrmacher employs Lars Elleström's intermedial theory to analyse the ontological shift in literary form, revealing how digital poetic experience is remediated through code, interaction, and algorithmic design, enabling new human-machine forms of creativity.

Dustin Hellberg's "Sacred Signs or Empty Words: A Naturalistic and Semiotic Comparison of AI vs Human Generated Art" introduces a critical rupture, as it

interrogates the ontological stakes of creativity itself in the face of AI. Using Peircean semiotics, particularly the notions of the rheme and dicisign, Hellberg proposes that while AI-generated texts may simulate literary coherence, they fundamentally lack the joint intentionality and sacredness derived from human sociability and cultural embeddedness. His analysis offers a critical counterpoint to techno-utopian claims, highlighting the ongoing role of human intentionality in art.

These initial chapters offer insights and implications for understanding literary compositions as polyphonic art practices, preparing the ground for renewed investigations into literature's deep historical entanglements with visual media and embedded artworks. Thus, the following chapters in the anthology address literature's historical entanglements across media. In "On the Narrative and Moral Functions of Fictitious Portraits in E.A. Poe's 'The Oval Portrait', M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier explores the narrative and moral implications of fictitious portraits, artworks that exist solely within the text. The essay draws upon A.S. Byatt's distinctions between "literary portraits," "portraits in literature," and "fictitious portraits" to articulate how embedded visual art deepens our understanding of character, plot, and genre. Brusberg-Kiermeier's analysis engages gendered representations, visibility, and morality, demonstrating how fictional portraits shape literary meaning by mediating the visible and the invisible.

The attention to the pictorial within the literary, both thematically and structurally, finds a contemporary analogue in the next chapter, which focuses on the remediation of live performance for screen-based experiences, continuing the volume's investigation of intermedial aesthetics. Mike Ingham's chapter, "Remediating Stage Dramas for Cinema Audiences: Two Notable Case Studies," critically examines the phenomenon of simulcast and captured live screenings of theatrical productions. By contrasting pre- and post-COVID examples, Ingham analyses how such remediations alter the aesthetic and semiotic experience of dramatic texts, thus challenging established boundaries between stage and screen. Despite their mediated form, these performances retain the literary quality of drama, now reimaged through cinematic filters.

As Ingham's essay brings stage and screen into dialogic interplay, the anthology turns toward the visual medium of anime, where hybrid cultural forms push the literary beyond the conventional text. Thiago Barbosa Soares' chapter, "Semiotics of the Carer: An Archetypal Analysis of Trunks from *Dragon Ball Z*," explores mythic archetypes and narrative structures by tracing the archetypal figure of the carer within Japanese cultural codes. Using Carl Jung's insights, Soares deciphers Trunks' evolution as a character caught between filial duty and heroic individuality. The analysis illustrates how anime, as a literary art form, can articulate complex emotional and moral negotiations. The chapter anticipates broader cultural and spiritual dynamics that unfold in the next chapter.

Elena Azmanova-Rudarska's "From Sacred Murals to Drama Characters – Intermedial and Transmedial Transformations of Verbal and Visual Images of the Seven Slavic Saints (Saints Heptaritmoi) in Bulgarian Culture (Eighteenth to Twentieth Century)," shows how from mural to manuscript to theatre stage, the Saints Heptaritmoi evolve through Bulgarian cultural history in response to changing political and ideological

conditions, reflecting broader societal shifts. By analysing the movement of meanings across media, Azmanova-Rudarska shows the fluidity of cultural narratives and the role of literature in preserving and adapting collective identities, where sacred iconography is recontextualised and secularised.

Previous reflections find an echo in the following chapter, which examines how ecopoetry addresses environmental degradation. Peter Schmidt's "Contemporary Ecopoems Reimagine What the 'Literary Landscape' Is" traces the evolution of ecopoetry, particularly in light of the erosion of the sacred connection between landscape and spirituality—once personified in the notion of the *genius loci* that situates poetry within a landscape marked by ecological devastation and historical atrocity. Through analyses of A. R. Ammons, Jane Hirshfield, and Mayra Santos-Febres, Schmidt articulates how ecopoetry navigates themes of rage, grief, guilt, and denial, reflecting humanity's complex relationship with the environment. The literary landscape, in this context, is not just a metaphorical topos, but also a contested and damaged semiotic field where the poetic becomes a site of intermedial mourning.

In "Exploring Spiritual Aspects between *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible: An Intertextual Investigation", James Seanego engages with Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to trace spiritual lineages across three seminal texts. This analysis highlights the fact that literature is always-already intertextual and intermedial in the sense that it exists within a network of resonances that encompasses both material and ideational transfers. The dream motif, central to all three texts, functions as a "transmedial invariant", as Nicoleta Popa Blanariu posited in the second chapter of the anthology, carrying theological and existential weight. The analysis reveals how dreams and spiritual journeys serve as narrative devices that bridge disparate texts, emphasising literature's role in perpetuating while transforming spiritual themes.

The role of literature as a space for ontological, epistemological and existential reflection is also exemplified in Boutheina Boughnim's "Writing on the Edge: Self-Elegy in S. Plath and J. L. Nancy's Notion of 'Excription'". This reading of Sylvia Plath's "Edge" through Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical lens foregrounds the notion of poetic self-elegy as a liminal act. Boughnim shows how Plath's poetic representation of death transcends biographical interpretation and gestures toward a metaphysical threshold—what Nancy calls "excription"—where body, psyche, and language stand at the brink of meaning. This contribution adds another layer of contemplative dimension to the volume.

Transitioning to socio-political terrains, Paulo Roberto Ramos's "Against the Principle of Oppression: Literature and Resistance in the Prose of Graciliano Ramos", delves into the prose of Graciliano Ramos, particularly *Barren Lives* and *São Bernardo*. Through incisive realism, Ramos criticises the oppressive structures embedded in Brazilian society, aligning with Walter Benjamin's imperative to interpret history against the grain, thus resisting the symbolic domination of narrative itself. The study anchors literary production in a realist aesthetic that responds to social injustice, drawing attention to the dehumanisation of memory and a resistance to systemic narrative erasures. The chapter foregrounds a central dynamic of this volume: literature's ability to operate across multiple ideological registers while dialoguing with the media that surround and shape its articulation.

The volume comes full circle with the historical reconsideration of the literary life of one the canonical figures of the Western literary landscape. Peter Ernest Razzell's "The Life of Shakespeare: The Growth of Literature" revisits the bard's biography through recent archival research. He challenges traditional narratives by emphasising Shakespeare's early cosmopolitan exposures, reframing his artistic formation through socio-economic and cultural experiences. Razzell's essay illustrates how the historical study of literature remains in flux, shaped by new evidence and interpretive frames.

Collectively, these scholarly contributions challenge traditional notions of literature as a self-contained verbal art. Taken together, the sixteen chapters offer a compelling vision of literature as an art form, which evolves through ideological intertextual and intermedial practices. Each chapter also demonstrates how literature both absorbs and reshapes the media environments in which it circulates and, in doing so, they invite to reconceive it as a dynamic process: a form of *techno-poïesis* that is always becoming, always migrating across modes, formats and sensibilities. The evolving intermedial literary landscape is not merely a context in which literature happens; it is literature's very condition of possibility.

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Chapter 1

Techno-Poïesis and Intermedial Semiosis in David O'Reilly's Videogame *Everything*

Asunción López-Varela Azcárate

Abstract

Building on recent research in posthumanist and neomaterialist thought, the study considers a techno-poetic consciousness that blurs the distinction between the natural and the artificial (human-made) and pays attention to small but significant natural elements, silica in particular, and their deep influence on the development of human life and, more recently, digital culture. Adopting an intermedial semiotic approach, the chapter interweaves perspectives from semiotics, art, and mythology to analyse *Everything*, a videogame created by Irish filmmaker and game developer David O'Reilly. The game and its short video serve as a case study in the evolving landscape of interactive gaming. By shifting player perception through spatial immersion and scale traversal, *Everything* fosters a relational understanding of existence and challenges anthropocentric perspectives, with implications for eco-cultural education and gamification trends. In this way, the chapter discusses the evolving digital spaces of artistic creation.

Keywords: ecology, everything, O'Reilly, posthumanism, neomaterialism, semiotics, techno-poïesis, videogames

1. Introduction

The term “techno-poïesis” refers to an interdisciplinary approach that explores meaning-making processes across various media, embracing a holistic view that positions everything that exists, whether organic or inorganic, material and immaterial, human or nonhuman, as part of a continuum [1]. Aristotle's notion of poïesis, at the root of the term poetry, did not merely refer to artistic expression. It meant a mode of bringing-forth or enacting an act of creation that transformed potential into actuality (*Metaphysics*, 1048a) [2]. Poïesis is foundational to human agency, enabling the articulation of knowledge through symbolic forms that intertwine imagination, materiality, and action.

Aristotle also distinguished between two kinds of knowledge: “episteme” (theoretical knowledge) and “techne” (practical or productive knowledge). Techne referred to

the know-how or craftsmanship required to produce something, and this is where the connection to the etymological meaning of art as “skill” becomes clear. For Aristotle, art is a form of “*techne*”, where a person applies learned techniques to achieve a specific outcome. Aristotle did not treat art as the aesthetic pursuit of beauty, or a form of personal subjective and intersubjective expression, as Renaissance and particularly Romantic perspectives would do [3], but as an intellectual and systematic craft grounded in mimetic principles. Using the example of tragic drama, he considered all forms of artistic representation an imitation of life involving intentional actions. *Techno-poiesis* seeks to extend Aristotle’s ideas by aligning them with those of Harvard semiotician Charles S. Peirce.

Peirce claimed that there was “a continuity between the characters of mind and matter.” (CP: 6.277, 1893) [4]. He meant that mental and material phenomena are interconnected through universal laws, proposing that the material and the immaterial are governed by these tendencies. These ideas were part of his dynamic and systemic view of causality, which integrated habits, laws, and potentialities into a model that transcended Aristotle’s teleological ideas of a moving agent. Just as Aristotle considered poetry to be a means of exploring universal truths through analogy and metaphor, the techno-poetic lens reveals how a wide conception of intermediality contributes to the understanding of symbiotic relations and distributed forms of agency across different mediums, including the biological and the technological [5].

This exploration also aligns with contemporary theoretical trends in fields such as neomaterialism, posthumanism, and ecocritical approaches, where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the artificial (human-made), the material and the immaterial are being questioned and redefined. The techno-poetic perspective acknowledges that humans and nonhumans, including not only biological beings but also inorganic matter and complex technological artefacts, all participate in the unfolding of reality, reaffirming the generative power of art in its widest sense.

The term “art” comes from the Latin *ars*, meaning “skill,” “craft,” or “discipline.” It is derived from the Proto-Indo-European root *ar-*, meaning “to fit together” or “to join,” which underlies concepts of skill, order, and technique. “*Ars*” thus originally referred to a form of know-how (“*techne*”), especially in the context of manual craftsmanship or the application of certain techniques. Over time, its meaning expanded to encompass a wider range of human endeavours, including the creation of artistic works, gradually understood as expressions of human imagination.

The historical evolution of the concept of art goes hand in hand with the changes in knowledge systems or “epistemes,” highlighting the transition from mytho-poetic analogic frameworks in oral cultures, to analytical and referential reasoning practices in later periods. Michel Foucault’s [6] and Timothy Reiss’s [7] ideas illustrate how different epistemes coexist and interact, representing shifting power-knowledge systems. Reiss’s analysis, for instance, demonstrates the shift from pattern-based mytho-poetic thinking to more abstract, analytical modes of thought. These transitions have always been related to technological advances, propitiating what Thomas Kuhn termed “paradigm shifts” [8].

This opening chapter of *Literature as an Art Form* examines the concept of “*techno-poiesis*” within intermedial meaning-making processes, positioning it as a conceptual bridge between scientific, philosophical, and artistic knowledge systems. Through this lens, the chapter traces the evolution of cultural, ontological, and epistemological dimensions toward process-systemic paradigms. While the first

section is primarily theoretical, the second part explores David O'Reilly's videogame, *Everything*, as an illustrative case study to demonstrate key philosophical concepts in practice. The analysis aligns with posthumanist perspectives that challenge human-centred subjectivity, as well as neomaterialist approaches that emphasise the intricate interrelations between human and nonhuman forces. These frameworks question anthropocentric notions of human exceptionalism, recognising the agency and vitality of nonhuman entities.

2. The continuum of life and the distribution of agencies

Viewed in comparison to Foucault and Reiss, where episteme is seen as a historical and cultural framework of knowledge governing a specific era through particular power relations and discursive formations, Aristotle, in contrast, only referred to it as universal, theoretical knowledge grounded in logic and reason, independent of historical contexts and linked to objective universal unmoving truths. This conception is related to his ideas on causality, found notably in his *Physics* (Book II, Chapters 3–9) [9] and *Metaphysics* (Book V, Chapter 2) [2], which were among the first attempts to explain agency.

Aristotle formulated four causes that explain why things exist or occur by identifying four types of causes—material (the substance from which something is made), formal (the defining characteristics), efficient (the initiating agent or mover), and final (the purpose or end goal). In Aristotle's view, final causes were central, as they provided the rationale for existence, often linked to intrinsic purposes or functions, even in natural phenomena, as captured in his assertion that nature does nothing in vain (*Physics* 194a23–32) [9]. However, Peirce contended that it was an “error to think that a final cause is necessarily a purpose. A purpose is merely that form of the final cause which is most familiar to our experience” (CP: 1.211, 1902) [4]. Thus, he rejected the notion that final causes are exclusively tied to intentions. Peirce argued that final causality encompasses broader patterns, laws, and tendencies that guide processes over time, often independent of intentionality [4].

Peirce's systemic understanding of a continuum in everything that exists, which he termed “synechism” [10] is aligned with the algorithmic patterns and recursive processes present in contemporary digital projects like David O'Reilly's videogame, *Everything* [11]. Peirce's recognition of the complexity inherent in the natural world led him to describe laws as probabilistic rather than strictly deterministic—emerging from diversity and spontaneous occurrences rather than following rigid, mechanical patterns (CP: 1.161, 1897) [4]. As Peirce famously observed, “What we call matter is not completely dead, but is merely mind hidebound with habits” (CP: 6.158, 1892) [4]. This statement highlights his view that even matter retains a dynamic, quasi-mental dimension, governed by evolving patterns and habits. Peirce's ideas suggest a scaling of agency that differentiates between humans and nonhumans, as well as animate and inanimate entities.

Thought is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, crystals and throughout the purely physical world; and one can no more deny that it is really there, than that the colours, the shapes, etc., of objects are really there. [...] Not only is thought in the organic world, but it develops there. But as there cannot be a General without Instances embodying it, so there cannot be thought without Signs. We must here give “Sign” a very wide sense, no doubt, but not too

wide a sense to come within our definition. Admitting that connected Signs must have a Quasi-mind, it may further be declared that there can be no isolated sign (CP: 4.551, 1906) [4].

Peirce sees cognition as not limited to human brains but emerging through interactions by means of signs within the physical world. This conceptual framework anticipates contemporary discussions in the cognitive sciences regarding how to scale up the interactions between entities and their environments. Peirce's conception challenges Cartesian dualisms by situating purpose and mechanism within a continuum, thereby highlighting their reciprocal relationship in forming emergent patterns, regularities, and laws. This framework harmoniously integrates teleological and mechanistic perspectives, showing that final causality finds expression through the organising structures of efficient causality. Rather than being opposed, final and efficient causes are mutually constitutive within a dynamic continuum of evolution and habit formation. This holistic view finds echoes in contemporary enactivist and material engagement theories, which emphasise emergent, self-generating processes of cognition.

Lambros Malafouris's Material Engagement Theory (MET) builds on this Peircean framework by advocating for a distributed and emergent understanding of agency. Like Peirce, Malafouris views cognitive processes as continuous with the material world, where agency emerges from dynamic couplings between humans, artefacts, and environments. This conceptualisation dissolves the sharp boundary between subject and object, placing humans and their material engagements "in the middle" of a co-evolutionary system of meaning-making. As he puts it:

The functional anatomy of the human mind (which includes the whole organism, that is, brain/CNS and body) is a dynamic bio-cultural construct subject to continuous ontogenetic and phylogenetic transformation by behaviourally important and socially embedded experiences. These experiences are mediated and sometimes constituted by the use of material objects and artefacts (e.g., the blind man's stick) which for that reason should be seen as continuous, integral, and active parts of the human cognitive architecture ([12], p. 244).

The implications of this integrated view are profound: rather than seeing cognition as contained solely within the mind, it becomes an active, semiotic engagement with the material environment where symbols and artefacts participate in thought processes. Peirce's notion that "thought is not necessarily connected with a brain" (CP: 4.551, 1906) [4] finds clear echoes in Malafouris's claim that artefacts, such as a "blind man's stick," are integral, active components of the cognitive architecture ([12], p. 244). Both perspectives see cognition as an emergent process shaped by engagement with signs and material things that exert corresponding actions in the human world.

MET's conception of agency also resonates with Peirce's semiotic philosophy by challenging subject-object dualisms and redefining the locus of causality. As Malafouris states, "agency and intentionality may not be properties of things, but they are not properties of humans either; they are the properties of material engagement, that is, of the grey zone where brain, body, and culture conflate" ([13], p. 22). This perspective aligns with Peirce's view that cognitive processes extend into the material and organic environment, forming a continuum where signs, matter, and minds coalesce.

Malafouris's example of clay as a material that affords a flow of noetic activity illustrates how material engagement enhances neural plasticity and shapes cognition. The potter-clay interaction exemplifies this: while the potter might make decisions, the clay's texture, physical properties, and responsiveness co-determine the actions performed. As Malafouris aptly remarks, "trying to separate cause from effect inside the loop of pottery making is like trying to construct a pot while keeping your hands clean from the mud" ([13], p. 25).

This scenario aligns with Peirce's rejection of linear, deterministic causality in favour of a probabilistic, habit-forming model where causes and effects emerge reciprocally. As aforementioned, Peirce viewed final and efficient causes as mutually constitutive within a continuum, similar to Malafouris' symmetrical relationships between the potter and clay. In both frameworks, external factors—including tools and materials—are not passive. The potter's wheel "shapes the field of action and has a share and say on our will and intentions" ([13], p. 28). This recalls Peirce's assertion that even inanimate matter is not "completely dead, but merely mind hidebound with habits" (CP: 6.158, 1892) [4], suggesting that material structures possess dynamic properties that influence human engagement.

Malafouris further argues that agency must be decoupled from subject-object distinctions and dissociated from intentionality as a uniquely human property. He recalls the distinction between "prior intention" and "intention in action," emphasising that in the latter, internal intentional states and external movements become indistinguishable yet produce pragmatic effects in the world. Ultimately, agency is seen as a temporal and interactively emergent property of activity rather than an innate and fixed attribute of the human condition. As Malafouris observes, "the ultimate cause of action in this chain of micro and macro events is none of the supposed agents, humans or nonhumans; it is the flow of activity itself" ([13], p. 35). This perspective aligns closely with Peirce's conception of semiosis as an ongoing process where signs generate new interpretants in an endless continuum of meaning-making, where the non-conscious quasi-minds of nonhumans and tech tools, like AI can operate semiotically even if out-of-awareness.

To conclude this section, the techno-poetic reinterpretation of Aristotle's poësis (often translated as "production") finds a compelling parallel in Peirce's process-oriented philosophy and in MET perspectives, highlighting the dynamic and creative unfolding of creation. Poësis emerges as an ongoing, iterative process characterised by the interplay between efficient and final causes, an interaction that creates a bridge between theoretical knowledge and creative practice as well as between stability and transformation. In this light, artistic production becomes a negotiation between habitual structures and emergent possibilities.

Peirce's emphasis on the probabilistic nature of causality and the evolving nature of habits allows poësis to be conceptualised not merely as the realisation of predetermined forms, but as a living process of material engagement and conceptual production. This expanded understanding situates art not as a static object but as a dynamic form of poësis that foregrounds the symbolic, affective, and material dimensions of experience. Thus, the techno-poetic framework resonates with the transformative role of technological advancements, particularly those that introduce new ways of perceiving the world through optical instruments. From early innovations like microscopes and telescopes to contemporary screen technologies and virtual spaces, tools that have not only augmented visual perception, but also reshaped the very processes by which knowledge is generated, structured, and understood. Technological mediation thus becomes a form of poësis—a recursive and evolving act of creation that reconfigures perception, cognition, and knowledge.

In Peircean terms, such technological mediation embodies a continuum where signs, material instruments, and technologies co-participate in shaping epistemological frameworks. Just as poïesis bridges theoretical understanding and artistic production, technology as poïesis fosters new interpretive engagements that dissolve rigid distinctions between art, science, and cognition. These iterative transformations reveal a dynamic world in which perception and meaning are continuously reshaped through evolving interactions between human thought, material artefacts, and symbolic systems.

David O'Reilly's *Everything* [11] can be seen as a contemporary site of techno-poïesis, where narrative, visual representation, and technological mediation intertwine to produce dynamic, emergent forms of meaning-making. The work illustrates how technological environments reconfigure perception and cognition, fostering an interconnected understanding that transcends rigid disciplinary divides. Viewed through a process-oriented lens aligned with Peirce's semiotic and causal frameworks, *Everything* becomes a site where art, science, and technology converge in iterative cycles of creation and interpretation.

In O'Reilly's digital environment, self-generating systems exhibit emergent tendencies and regularities oriented toward evolving patterns rather than explicit, predetermined outcomes. This dynamic process exemplifies the interplay between Peirce's concepts of efficient and final causality. Efficient causality, manifest through chains of mechanisms, laws, and habits, provides the material structure through which events unfold. However, without final causality—understood as a guiding purpose or orienting principle—efficient causality risks evolving into incoherent, aimless processes. Likewise, final causality without efficient manifestation remains a mere potentiality, incapable of material realisation. In *Everything*, this reciprocal relationship is exemplified by the game's capacity to move forward even when left unattended. The system's patterns and regularities are not imposed externally, but emerge from recursive intra-actions, embodying Peirce's idea that "habit-taking" governs the evolution of complex systems. In this sense, O'Reilly's work illustrates how technological mediation becomes a form of techno-poïesis, where efficient and final causes coalesce in a continuum of creative expression and emergent meaning.

3. Myth-matters: The importance of the material in creative poïesis

Techno-poïesis acknowledges the entanglement of symbolic narratives (including art and myth) with material realities such as instruments, technologies, and the social processes that enable their evolution. This framework not only emphasises the creative interplay between materiality and symbolic systems but also recognises how myths actively mediate human understanding rather than merely serving as narrative fictions. As José Manuel Losada indicates, "Myth is a functional, symbolic, and thematic account of extraordinary events with a sacred, supernatural, and transcendent referent, lacking, in principle, historical testimony and referring to an individual or collective cosmogony or eschatology that is always absolute" ([14], p. 193).

Across diverse cultures, cosmogonic myths frequently position natural elements, particularly stones, as foundational materials in creation narratives. They symbolise the origins of life and the cosmos, and the link with the divine. Some examples are the Black Stone of Mecca, the Omphalos or navel of the world at the sanctuary of Delphi in ancient Greece, the stones with the inscription of the Ten Commandments in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, the sacred stone of the Celtic St.

Brigid in Ireland, or the Stone of Destiny associated with the coronation of Scottish kings. In their respective traditions, these ancient narratives, around a simple object like a stone, serve as symbolic points of veneration, where some natural objects have become sacred, fulfilling mythical functions.

Plato's *Timaeus*, for example, presents a cosmological account in which the four elements or "stoicheion" (earth, air, fire, and water), signify the link between bio-principles, geometry, and mathematical replicative structures based on harmonic analogies connected to both syllables and numbers. He draws an analogy between the composition of these elements and the structure of language, highlighting his belief in a universal logic underlying all languages (*Timaeus* 53c) [15]. Just as syllables can recombine to produce endless variations of words, the four elements transform and combine to produce the diversity of phenomena in the physical world. The notion of the universe as a kind of "textuality," written by the Demiurge, and including a sort of coded language half way between human discourse and mathematical replicative code, shows interesting parallels with the understanding of digital creation.

These narratives often reflect the intricate interplay between the natural world, human creativity, and the tools and acts of engineering used in artistic practices. While many creation epics depict life on earth as the outcome of cosmic struggles, with primordial gods engaged in conflicts that ultimately shape the universe, these acts are often supported by advanced technologies. In myths, creation is often framed through acts of separation and ordering of primordial natural substances.

Intriguingly, while stones often contain silica, this component is also present in clay minerals, whose technological significance has endured across millennia, from early flint stone tools and Neolithic mud habitats to its central role in the digital technologies that define Silicon Valley. The persistent motif of silica-containing materials and clay as instruments of creation resonates deeply with mythic narratives of creation. For instance, in ancient Mesopotamia, the Sumerian god Enki, aided by the primordial goddess Nammu, shapes humanity from clay extracted from the abyss. Later, in Tablet VI of the Babylonian *Enūma Eliš* humankind is formed from clay mixed with the blood of a defeated chaos god, showing the symbolic link between the creation of human life and elemental materials ([16], p. 51); ([17], pp. 35–37); ([18], p. 70). Greek mythology echoes these themes through Prometheus, who moulds the first humans from clay [19]. Egyptian cosmogonies feature Khnum, the potter god, creating life forms on his wheel ([20], pp. 396–399). Some studies suggest that the biblical Genesis account, in which God forms the first man from clay and breathes life into him (Genesis 1:11), draws upon earlier traditions, echoed also in Islamic scripture (Qur'an 23:12 mentioned in Hjelm and Thompson [21], pp. 68–72). These narratives not only emphasise clay's materiality but also frame technological processes, instruments, and tools as related to divine acts of creation [22].

By examining these creation myths through the lens of materiality and technological agency, it becomes evident that these narratives reflect humanity's deep-seated engagement with the processes of making and transformation. In a striking parallel, contemporary biochemical studies highlight the creative capacity of silica at the molecular level. Jack Szostak's work on the origins of life suggests that clay minerals may have played a catalytic role in the formation of RNA, one of life's essential building blocks. This intersection between ancient myth and scientific discovery highlights an enduring intuition: creation is a dynamic process mediated by elemental materials [23]. The persistence of these motifs, as in the term "Silicon Valley," reveals how they continue to shape the contemporary understanding of creativity and technological progress.

4. Elementary, my dear readers: From the flint stones to contemporary microchips

The millennial trajectory of human progress is intricately linked to a foundational element—silicon. From the earliest stages of civilisation to the present digital era, silicon has served as both a literal and metaphorical cornerstone in human technological and cultural evolution. This element, which constitutes the second most abundant component of the earth's crust after oxygen, has accompanied humanity from the prehistoric Stone Age to the realm of Artificial Intelligence.

Silicon is not only prevalent in inorganic matter but also integral to biological life. In the human body, it functions as a structural component of skin, nails, bones, and connective tissues. It might be no coincidence that ancient creation myths often depict humanity as being shaped from primordial silicon-rich clay. In its earliest applications, silicon, primarily in the form of flint, played a pivotal role in tools that allowed Homo Faber to carve, cut, and ignite fire. Clay was also the base of pottery, ceramics, and glass, enabling the construction of dwellings, vessels, and writing surfaces. Flint stone, in particular, became a crucial medium for early communication, from petroglyphs to sacred monuments that served as mnemonic markers of collective memory. The Greek term *sêma*, which forms the root of semiotics, highlights the connection between stone markers and the development of sign systems in early human societies [24]. Monumental inscriptions, such as those on the Rosetta Stone, or the tablets narrating the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, highlight the significance of silica-based materials in the evolution of written language. Scandinavian rune stones, Celtic Ogham inscriptions, and iconic megalithic sites like Stonehenge further illustrate the sacred and communicative roles of silicon-bearing structures. These instances of early writing and symbolic representation demonstrate the profound interrelation between human cognitive development and the material properties of silicon.

One of silicon's most remarkable properties is its capacity for doping—a process through which impurities are introduced to alter its conductivity. This characteristic, which has enabled the development of modern electronics, resonates with ancient beliefs that minerals possessed inherent sacred and magic qualities. In medieval alchemy, silicon was attributed to healing properties, and in contemporary science, it has effectively become the Philosopher's Stone of the Digital Revolution. It underpins all modern knowledge-supporting devices, from computers and smartphones to AI systems. The enduring significance of silicon illustrates how small things and seemingly humble materials have shaped the course of human development, both technologically and culturally. Silicon embodies the continuity between materiality and the symbolic systems through which humans understand and reshape the world.

David O'Reilly's *Everything* [11] offers a reflection on these ideas by dissolving the boundaries between the natural and digital worlds, illustrating the dynamic agency embedded in elemental substances and their technological extensions. As players navigate diverse worlds where objects, no matter how small, hold transformative potential, the game echoes the historical and philosophical trajectory of elemental matter. This thread, intermedially and semiotically linking myth, materiality, and technological poësis, highlights the intricate interplay between the material foundations of life and the symbolic architectures that define human creativity and knowledge.

5. Being “In the Middle”

Conceived, directed, and financed by David O'Reilly over the course of almost four years, *Everything* [11] and its animated short [25], which encapsulates the core experience of the videogame, premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, earning an Oscar nomination in 2017. The game offers an immersive exploration of a micro and macroscopic universe, enabling players to engage symbiotically with a vast array of entities. The game experience aligns with the notion of intermedial co-agencies discussed earlier, wherein the technological medium is not merely a conduit, but an active participant in shaping cognitive and affective learning. In its incorporation of role-play, free-play (sandbox), and simulation, the game allows users to approach reality from diverse perspectives. It also enables emergent self-organising interactions, for the game experience can also advance without direct human intervention, embodying forms of “auto-poiesis” like those found in natural life [26]. Nathan Grayson [27] described how the game continues autonomously when left unattended, emphasising the ungovernable enactive agencies of nature and existence [27].

Everything foregrounds a deep ecological and neomaterialist perspective by drawing attention to the interconnectedness of the material and the immaterial as well as the organic and the inorganic. By allowing players to navigate the cosmos from multiple perspectives—ranging from basic chemical elements and microscopic bacteria to celestial bodies—the game creates a sense of fluidity that reorients the player's perception of selfhood, scale, and agency. This positioning “in the middle” destabilises the conventional subject-object dichotomy, offering an experience in which players perceive themselves as a part of the broader continuum of life, as Peirce would have it. The immersive spatiality of the game encourages the experience of being in relation to everything else, situating the player as an observer attuned to their surroundings. The game invites players to traverse a mythic space where all entities coexist symbiotically, recalling the relational ontologies present in various creation myths discussed earlier. The spatial immersion of *Everything* also transforms the player's understanding of their place within the universe, fostering a phenomenological awareness of interconnectedness and mutual dependency. In contrast to traditional videogames that often emphasise goal-oriented progress and linear narratives, *Everything* invites the player to adopt a contemplative stance, where players come to perceive themselves as integral parts of a complex, ever-changing web of life.

The sense of agency enabled by the game dynamics is not based on control, mastery, or domination, but on a sense of cooperation with the rest of nonhuman entities in the world. Like Peirce and Malafouris, Karen Barad's [28] theory of agential realism posits that agency is not an inherent property of individuals, but an emergent phenomenon arising from intra-actions within a network of relations, ideas that can be seen in *Everything*, where the players' actions are part of a larger self-organising system. The videogame's mechanics further reinforce this notion by enabling elements within the game world to move and evolve independently of the player's direct input. This auto-poietic quality mirrors real-world ecosystems, where individual entities influence and are influenced by the broader environmental context, emphasising a relational, rather than autonomous, sense of existence.

Beyond its programming, the choices made in its conceptualisation—such as the inclusion of Alan Watts' philosophical discourse, and the framing of the experience as a meditative reflection, highlight the ways in which human cultural narratives steer storytelling in digital environments. Watt's audio track frames the game within a

specific discourse of holistic thinking influenced by Eastern philosophies that emphasise the interconnectedness of all beings. *Everything* can also be seen as an example of what Bruno Latour described as the co-production of technology and culture—where technological artefacts are not neutral tools, but rather entangled with cultural values, histories, and ideologies. Latour’s work has shaped contemporary neomaterialists perspectives such as Sheila Jasanoff’s [29] or Barad’s agential realism, as well as her notion of “intra-actions”, concepts that connect interestingly with Watt’s and Peirce’s belief in the existence as part of a larger interwoven evolving continuum.

Every creature in the universe that is in any way sensitive and in any manner of speaking conscious regards itself as a being. That is to say, it knows and is aware of a hierarchy of beings above it and a hierarchy of beings below it [...] That is to say that wherever you are, and whoever you are, you are in the middle (Watts, We as Organism, 1.4.5. s.p. emphasis added) [30].

In my view, *Everything* encourages a contemplative experience of being perpetually “in the middle” of interconnected realities, an experience enabled by the 3D environment itself (unlike 2D, which only allows experiences from the outside of the representation). The game turns its attention to the simplest entities and elements in nature, like the clay minerals discussed before, revealing the symbiotic relationships between organisms and their environments. Players transition between microscopic and macroscopic worlds, inhabiting the forms of both organic and inorganic matter, recalling Jane Bennett’s observation that inorganic matter is vibrant, although it might appear immobile. This is so because “its becoming proceeds at a rate below the threshold of human discernment” ([31], p. vii). Thus, as Watts had claimed, perspective becomes essential:

You can look at something with a naked eye and see it in a certain way; you look at it with a telescope and you see it in another way. Which level of magnification is the correct one? Well, obviously, they are all correct; they are just different points of view. You can, for example, look at a newspaper photograph under a magnifying glass and where, with the naked eye, you will see a human face, with a magnifying glass you will just see a profusion of dots rather meaninglessly scattered. But as you stand away from that collection of dots, which all seem to be separate and apart from each other, they suddenly arrange themselves into a pattern (We as Organism, 1.4.5. s.p.) [30].

Everything is a mythical world of metamorphic matter that seems to acquire a life of its own, as different species meet, in Donna Haraway’s terms [32]. As Stacy Alaimo has also noted, we must imagine a “trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world [...] ultimately inseparable from the environment” ([33], p. 2). This assertion echoes Watts’ ideas that every entity is part of an intricate network where everything depends on everything else:

It is not only that every little organism that exists depends on its total environment. The reverse is also true, that the total environment depends on each and every one of those little organisms so that you could say this universe consists of an arrangement or pattern in which every event is essential to the whole thing (Work as Play, s.p.) [34].

The videogame invites us to a sort of transmutation across time and space, hand in hand with the metamorphoses of natural life itself. It is not a question of following

a path in search of our destiny, but about tracing our own itinerary in the dance of things and signs: “[Life] is a dance, and when you are dancing you are not intent on getting anywhere” (Watts, “Work as Play” s.p.) [34]. In life’s dance of forms and signs, dancers need to learn to choreographically position themselves “in the middle,” in a habitat that is simultaneously material and immaterial, real (experiential) and virtual (conceptual and symbolic), shared with everything else that exists. Like other process ontologies, the ideological framework in *Everything* no longer depicts life as emerging from the hands of a divine potter who shapes human existence from clay. Instead, the creation process is reminiscent of Plato’s Demiurge-engineer, who encodes algorithmic instructions, such as Fibonacci sequences, to enable life’s self-replication without further divine intervention.

In *Everything*, mythical creation finds a contemporary expression in the poiesis of the algorithm, as players witness the agency embedded in the smallest elements and entities. In its millennia-spanning journey from early flint tools to the silicon microchips behind digital technologies, silica acquires a vibrant agency as well as a symbolic expression, co-creating the dynamic patterns that shape our world.

6. Conclusion

Games like *Everything* play a significant role in shaping behaviour and attitudes through the process of gamification where, in educational settings, game mechanics are applied to non-game contexts to influence awareness, pro-social behaviour, and engagement, also promoting sustainable practices. Unlike conventional gamified experiences that rely on extrinsic motivators such as points and rewards, *Everything* encourages reflection rather than competition or problem-solving. This stands in contrast to other didactic games that might employ clear objectives, such as resource management challenges, climate change simulations, or conservation missions. In comparison, *Everything* presents an open non-linear exploration where progress with the game world is marked by a gradual realisation of interconnectedness rather than by task completion.

In environmental education, there is a growing recognition of the need to understand ecological relationships holistically rather than in isolation, and *Everything* embodies this principle by immersing the player in a universe where they can inhabit and experience the interconnectedness of all entities, shifting perspectives from microscopic to macroscopic scales. By offering an auto-poietic experience—where the game continues to evolve even without the player’s direct input—*Everything* also subtly criticises the human tendency to dominate and manage nature, promoting instead an ethos of coexistence.

In doing so, *Everything* resonates with the posthumanist perspectives that advocate for a decentred human subjectivity as well as with neomaterialist awareness of the intricate entanglements between human and more-than-human forces. These approaches challenge the anthropocentric belief in human exceptionalism and acknowledge the vitality and agency of nonhumans. The game’s auto-generative features further dismantle human-centric perspectives of goal-oriented progression by creating a universe that exists beyond anthropocentric intention and control. The game’s visual and narrative structure embodies nomadism and a transmutation reminiscent of mythic metamorphoses, positioning players as participants in the dance of existence, transitioning seamlessly between different states, and being defined not by individual autonomy but by interconnected multiplicities.

Ultimately, *Everything* exemplifies how digital media function as liminal spaces where human culture and technological agency converge, shaping and influencing each other. The game's fluid perspective also suggests that technology has the potential to expand perception beyond anthropocentric limits while engaging with the cultural narratives that shape human interpretations of technological possibilities. Through this interplay, *Everything* invites reflection on the evolving relationship between humans and more-than-human agencies, including all the elements of nature as well as digital machines, emphasising their mutual imbrication in the construction of meaning in a digital AI mediated world.

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CompLit in the Era of CompMedia: Renewing the Concept of Invariant for a New Comparative Approach

Nicoleta Popa Blanariu

Abstract

The starting point of this research is an already classic conclusion in the field of comparative literature: the invariant is a key concept in literary comparatism and in (inter)cultural studies. In this paper, I propose, define, and illustrate with some examples the concept of *transmedial invariant* while identifying different subtypes within the large category of artistic and communicational phenomena covered by this concept. To exemplify, I will use it as a tool to briefly describe a small corpus of works from various artistic fields. Under the broader concept of transmedial invariant, I will subsume those constants of discourse and imaginary that manifest themselves in various arts and artistic languages or, more generally, in different communication media, going beyond, at the same time, the inevitable differences between the physical or esthetic environments. Essentially, I will highlight two types of transmedial invariants: discursive (pertaining to the discourse structure) and thematic (content-related). In my opinion, transmedial invariant is a concept on which relies what I could call a multisystemic and translinguistic comparatism, closely related to an “interartistic” one.

Keywords: comparative literature, comparative media, multisystemic comparatism, transmedial invariant, interartistic, intermedial, translinguistic

1. Introduction: From CompLit to comparative media

Uncomfortable questions targeting cultural traditions, which are hardly the result of a consensus, often prompt the reassessment of methodological approaches in comparative literature and, more broadly, in the field of humanities: “why should we study something called literature?”, “what is the *literary* anyway?” [1–3], “what is writing?” [3]. These questions seek to highlight the expressive potential of certain literary works and, more largely, of some cultural products and practices often overlooked in the Western canon. From this perspective, at the intersection with cultural studies, literature could be understood as a “discursive practice among many others” [4]. Bernheimer’s assertion is controversial, generating both approval and criticism. Michael Riffatere, for instance, expresses his discontent by noting that “the space of comparison has expanded way beyond literary objects, or even beyond artistic objects

other than the literary” [5]. According to Peter Brooks, literature remains a redoubtable “challenge” to other discursive forms that it interacts with [3]. It is precisely in this complex dynamics of competition, synergy, and negotiation between various discursive practices that comparative literature appears to define its own methodology and field of study.

In this context, some comparatists are willing to give up the privileged status of literature as the foundation of Western culture. From here emerges a rethinking of the field in terms of “comparative media,” as suggested by Rew Chow [2]. This is not only an alternative to the old discipline of comparative literature but also a means to integrate it into a broader context of creative and academic research practices. By defining *medium* as a “means of storage, retrieval, and transmission (of cultural) information,” Chow proposes “to bring literature into crisis through the concept of media” [2]. She believes that comparative literature can draw its inspiration from cultural studies, opening up to the research of media other than the verbal ones often used in literary or philosophical texts. Consequently, “a new discipline” could emerge in which the study of literature is reframed “not based on nations and national languages,” as in the comparative-historical tradition of the nineteenth century, but instead on “esthetic media, sign systems, and discourse networks” [2].

Therefore, in the era of high-performance technology, literature itself could be viewed as a “discursive practice among many others” [4]. It makes use of diverse media for its creation, conservation, transformation, and circulation. The text is (re)created in a variety of formats like print or digital (ebook, audiobook), comics, manga, television, radio, theater, film, music, dance, painting, graphics, book illustrations, video games, visual novels, and so on. That being the case, Rey Chow suggests that the very name itself of the comparative literature could be replaced with another, such as “comparative media” [2]. From this perspective, literature could be incorporated into a larger corpus of study, available to the most diverse approaches. In this context, the comparison between a literary work and other forms of artistic expression is fully legitimate. The object of comparative literature lies in the “reading across linguistic borders,” while “film, painting, opera, comics, etc., also kinds of language” [6] employ their own means and modes of expression, all of them covering a wide range of aspects of the human experience.

Especially noteworthy is that the inter- and transmedia turn in comparative literature highlights a significant shift in approach—from the “comparison of literatures” practiced in the early stages of the discipline to the “comparisons *with* literature” [6, 7], used increasingly nowadays. In contact with fields such as the history and theory of art, esthetics, film studies, performance studies, dance studies, transmedia studies, and other disciplines covering artistic phenomena, comparative literature facilitates the integration of a literary corpus with a broad range of artistic forms and media of expression.

2. Multisystemic, translinguistic, and “interartistic” comparatism

Within the new paradigm of comparative literature, what stands out is a component of intercultural and intermedial semiotics that has also been incorporated—albeit differently—in the working style of the comparatists from previous generations. Partially, it relies on what I can call a *translinguistic* core of the comparative approach, not only in Ref. to the verbal codes. As explained further below, I use this concept of translinguistic(s)—by focusing on translinguistic features

of expression—in a more general manner, as a tool able to unify the comparative approach to a variety of media, artistic languages, and communication codes, either verbal or not. In the interpretation I give here, the concept of translinguistic(s) relates to the profound aspects of language—what Saussure calls *langue* (an abstract system of norms shared by all members of a community) as opposed to *parole* (the manifestation of the system through individual acts of communication). More specifically, it is well known that the underlying structures of language are able to transcend the differences among particular languages. For instance, across different idioms, we can identify the same illocutionary acts: questioning, requesting, greeting, declaring, and so on. Otherwise said, the illocutionary act is a translinguistic category though the means of its manifestation naturally vary from one idiom to another. On a more general level, *universals* of language or discourse—such as narrative and actantial structures, illocutionary categories, and tropes (e.g., metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche)—transcend the immediately perceptible differences between the verbal and non-verbal, as I have illustrated in some previous contributions [8–15].

From this perspective, I found the comparative analysis of theater—or, more broadly, the performing arts and performativity—particularly interesting, as it examines the correlation between the verbal code of the text and the performative code of re(presentation) within a specific context that shapes both its production and reception. Through their syncretism, theater, performing arts, and even daily performativity are *interlinguistic* phenomena, highlighting the relationships between different languages (understood in a broader sense, as codes of expression and communication, either or not essentially artistic, either or not verbal) and various modes of esthetic expression in a multitude of (art) forms. Such relationships are facilitated by a translinguistic nucleus, identifiable in the functioning of various modes of expression—verbal and non-verbal—whether primarily esthetic or not. In this light, theater and performing arts, along with literature, can be equally incorporated into the object of comparative research. An argument could be made that the “possibility” for comparative literature relies precisely on “the fact that human beings, of whatever time, country and culture have used language” [6] in its various forms. For this approach—situated at the intersection of literary theory and performance studies—useful concepts and theoretical frameworks are provided by semiotics, general linguistics, philosophy of language, communication theory, discourse analysis, and pragmatics [8–15].

I believe that certain experiments conducted by the Dadaists and their successors can be regarded as literary-performative works that enrich and diversify the comparatists’ field of study. A good example is *L’Amiral qui cherche une maison à louer*—a polyphonic tapestry of idioms and artistic expressions that deliberately confuse the spectators, transporting them into an unfamiliar esthetic universe. This demands a mode or reception different from what is traditionally taught at the school of classic theater. To a certain extent, the Dadaist experiment resembles contemporary styles and genres, such as *slam poetry* and *performance poetry*, which are created to be performed before an audience or improvised ad hoc during the performance itself. A similar focus on the sound of the text and its performative dimension can be observed among the poets of the *Beat* Generation in the 1950s and the postmodern authors inspired by them. Thus, the interpretation is an integral part of the work as a whole, as well as the text itself, whether written or spoken. After initially classifying *performance poetry* within the field of theater, it is no coincidence that *The National Endowment for the Arts* in the United States later reclassified this mode of artistic expression as part of literature. According to Basil Buntig, the poem on the

page resembles a musical score that can only be fully understood when brought to life through sound. Beyond limiting itself to the recitation of poems accompanied by background instruments, the relationship with music is equally important. The Beat Poets' affinity for *jazz* is well known, as is their influence on *pop* and *rock and roll* musicians, such as the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Jim Morrison. To some extent, *performance poetry* could also be compared to the art of medieval European performance poets, such as troubadours, minstrels, and *minnesingers*, or to that of the ancient bards and aeds who recited their texts accompanied by music. Moreover, in ancient Greece, the declamation of tragic poetry was complemented by specific dances, such as *emmelia* and *hyporchem* [16].

In my opinion, these literary-performative formulae—"interartistic" [6] (and interlinguistic)—highlight the potential for a new comparative paradigm, offering the possibility for an integrated analysis of a syncretic esthetic phenomenon. Thus, literature is positioned in an esthetic partnership with the modes of expression associated with other artistic forms. As proposed and understood in this paper, the *multisystemic* nature of such approach lies in the correlation of certain distinct yet complementary systems of expression unique to different art forms. The comparatist approach would not only be "interliterary" [6] but, in a broader sense, also be "interartistic" [6] and multisystemic, aligning with the transformations in contemporary civilization, in its modes of communication and esthetic experience. In my opinion, a multisystemic approach to certain comparative media phenomena can pave the way toward refining the scope of comparatist studies in the future, making it worthy of further investigation—literature in relation to performing arts, visual arts, and new media arts. In its various forms, *whether verbal or non-verbal, language (and its universals) is their common denominator*. It is true that in contemporary artistic creation—*performance*, "installation," new media arts—the semio-linguistic paradigm of analysis is strongly challenged by the methodologies in the field of neuroscience.

In essence, I believe we are witnessing a translinguistic, transmedial, and multisystemic (in the sense referred to above) turning point in comparative literature in the era of new media. Especially within the trend of comparative media, this marks a decisive moment in literary studies and, ultimately, the entire field of contemporary humanities.

3. Some methodological issues: Above and beyond structuralism

3.1 Affiliation or analogy? The invariant as an alternative comparatist methodology

Literary similarities, or even intermedial ones (between literature and other art forms), are often explained as the effect of a certain influence or affiliation. However, "influences alone cannot fully explain all similar phenomena" [17]. Sometimes the similarity signals a certain analogy (homology) rather than a specific influence. For instance, a surprising literary motif is the "wasteland," that "*gaste pays*" that appears in the Grail novel series [18]. Mircea Eliade identified it in its first version in the myth of the "disappearing god," which was well known to the Anatolian Hittites in the second millennium BCE—long before the medieval European story. There are other examples, such as the motif of the Deluge, equally remarkable in its ubiquity [19]. Such motifs raise the question of their positioning within the typology of literary relationships: is their spread a matter of "influence" or "analogy"?

On the other hand, in the history of arts or literature, the unequivocal identification of a certain analogy could be problematic because, “near or far, in clear or opaque forms, somewhere in the history of human thought (...), in its artistic creation or esthetic (theory),” [17] one may eventually discover “common sources” [17] that led to similar works. To avoid the ambiguous boundary between influence and analogy, one can describe this literary relationship using the concept of the *invariant*. This allows for a holistic approach to the similarities across different literatures, encompassing both “similarities independent of direct contact” [20] and those resulting from certain influences that can be rigorously documented.

In some of my previous contributions, I explored the validity of the invariant as a concept within literary studies, particularly in the field of comparative literature. In a broader perspective, I view the literary invariants as being complementary to what I call the *transcultural invariants*, and in this chapter, I will integrate them into a potential “interliterary” [6] comparison. I can eventually foresee it as a particular case in intermedial comparison, which I will explore below.

3.2 The invariant as a “key concept” in literary comparatism and (inter)cultural studies: The comparatist method, from literary history to theory

It is well known that, according to the Russian Formalist School, the *literaturnost* (literariness) identifies a range of procedures by which a text is positioned within the field of literary arts and the esthetic appreciation of language. This theory has contributed significantly to the progress made in the understanding of literariness [5]. However, it can have an equally important impact on “redefining” comparatism, especially in the identification and classification of the invariant traits that underpin any comparison [5]. Invariants are more than “a smaller group of features” unique to a particular phenomenon. They “form a finite set of types without which the variation could not make sense,” and, in fact, could not even be detected [5]. For a long time, to clarify “the invariant features of change,” comparative literature relied on literary history to such an extent that invariance and variation became intertwined with values associated with temporality [5]. This approach led to the postulation of a literary “archetype,” or a “Ur-level of reference” [5] (i.e., a prototype of a series of variants, chronologically considered). However, the theoretical perspective has now surpassed the historical one. The former “starts from abstract models” that subsume “only the minimal, logical constituents of any combination of classes of factors” [5]. (As I am about to elaborate below, these “factors” can be, in my opinion, either discursive, register-related, or thematic, content-related.) In terms of C. S. Peirce’s semiotics, the relationship between the invariant (an abstract scheme) and its manifestation in concrete contexts is one between type and token(s). A class of phenomena, the invariant (type) manifests itself through the multitude of particular cases (tokens). After all, the invariants “approximate universals in the Aristotelian sense of the term” [5]. They establish an equivalence with their occurrences (actualizations). From another semiotic perspective, Greimas and Courtes view comparatism as an “ensemble of cognitive processes whose role is to establish, at the level of form, certain correlations” between two or more terms [21]. In doing so, one could arrive at a structural model, consisting of “invariants” [21].

Adrian Marino, following in the footsteps of his mentor René Étiemble, views the invariant as a “key concept of theoretical comparatism” [20]. By postulating the presence of certain “invariants” of the imaginary and of the literary discourse, Étiemble confirms some founding principles in anthropology. In its early stages, anthropology

relied on two controversial ideas originating in the nineteenth century: “human nature” (J.F. Blumenbach) and “the psychic unity of mankind” (Adolf Bastian) [22]. Even later, in the second half of the twentieth century, based on his research in comparative mythology and religion, Joseph Campbell [23] drew similar conclusions, noting “the unity of the human race” not only in its “biological” but also in its “spiritual history.” These concepts are based on the hypothesis that certain “elementary ideas” indicate the cultural unity of mankind [22]. In the 19th and 20th centuries, these premises led to the identification of certain “universal patterns of culture” [24]. The latter proves to be a “synoptic concept” fundamental to the methodology of intercultural studies [22]. With the “comparative method” being “indispensable to the formulation of the anthropological theory,” one of its goals is to “decide whether certain cultural elements” are “universal or not” [22]. “Therefore, through cross-cultural comparisons, certain universals have been established, such as the incestual taboo, the concept of family, the grammaticality of language, etc.” [22].

Particularly in the field of literature, these “constants” [20, 25] could help explain, let us say, the striking similarities between European pre-Romanticism and the works of Chinese poets from the pre-Christian era and the Song period. As Étiemble notes, “if I can explain all the themes of the European pre-Romanticism from the eighteenth century by referencing Chinese poetry dating back to the pre-Christian times and the first twelve centuries of the Christian era, it confirms that there are indeed common forms, genres, invariants, or in short, shared elements of mankind and literature” [26, 27]. In response to Étiemble, I would add, “literature (...) exists” as a universal corpus of texts that lend themselves to an analysis based on a range of common traits and criteria that could be named “invariants” [8]. As I will demonstrate below, these can be, in my opinion, either thematic (or content-related) or discursive (as seen in the actantial structure of the epic and dramatic genres, or in the semiotic formalization of the narrative action, to which I will refer in the next section).

The signaling of the invariant as a universal and transhistorical type has challenged the historical principle of the origin of literary forms (which holds that a given discursive or thematic structure is almost exclusively the product of a specific cultural-historical context). It has also called into question the principle of relationships between facts in the direct contact between literatures [20]. As long as similarities and “coincidences” appear between literary phenomena that never had any “contact,” one cannot speak of explicable “influences” in a positivist manner [20, 26, 27]. In this case, a plausible hypothesis could be the existence of certain “constants” [25] in literary discourse and imagination, which manifest over significant periods within cultural geography—in other words, the existence of invariants [20, 26]. Hence, Adrian Marino defines the invariant as “a universal element in literature,” a “common trait of literary discourse and thought” [20]. Thus understood, the invariant becomes a “key element in theoretical comparatism” [20].

The invariant allows for the reconciliation of two types of comparatist approaches: historical (concerned with the empirical aspect, the immediate, and the concrete) and, respectively, theoretical (focused on the essence manifested in history, but transgressing it, reaching the generality of transhistorical principles). The invariant can therefore contribute to a “yet anticipated” [21] “comparative poetics”—a “*cross-cultural poetics*” [20], also heralded by Étiemble [26, 27], Munteano [25], and Marino [20], among others. In its dual nature—historical and theoretical—the invariant identified by Étiemble and theorized by Marino resembles, in my opinion, what Viktor Shklovsky [28] named *topi* (from the Greek *topos*) or “communal places.” These “keep recurring precisely because the reason reveals a certain essence,” even though

“through its repetition, the essence is shifting” [28]. In fact, the essence does not “change” but rather materializes through the particular aspects of the literary material [8]. The “essence”—a theoretical, transhistorical, and invariable abstraction—gains the perceptible shape of the literary phenomenon manifested over time and space. This is precisely why Etiemble can detect “the conditions without which there is no perfect form anywhere, anytime” [26] among the literary invariants.

Eugen Coseriu believed that “a good linguist should be both botanist and gardener, theoretician and practitioner, a determined seeker of concrete data, but also attentive to the invariants that underlie them” [qtd. in 6]. This observation could extend to the study of literature, where we must not only notice “the particularities of a given text,” but also place it into wider context so we can discover “richer meanings” [6]. In this regard, comparative literature carries significant weight, alongside literary theory, criticism, and history. In particular, comparative literature “consolidates the hypotheses of literary theory every time it identifies invariants or general laws common to diverse traditions” [6]. If world literature is a “system of *variations*,” “one, not uniform,” [29] then a “comparative morphology” (i.e., an inventory of fundamental constituents derived from the comparative analysis) can be established through “the systematic study of how forms vary in space and time” [29]. This approach relies on the aforementioned relationship between the invariant and the variable, between type and token(s). The methodological principle is to “define a unit of analysis” and then to “follow its metamorphoses” in various contexts [29].

Taking into account the transmedial invariants, a concept that I will introduce and illustrate below, I would reconsider the working method. By analyzing the actualization of the invariant (or of “the unit”) across different means and modes of communication, one can draw not only a “comparative morphology” of the world literature(s) but also a “comparative morphology” of the *transmedial* imaginary. For effective research, Franco Moretti makes a useful recommendation: “the larger the geographic space one wants to study, the smaller should the unit of analysis be”: a concept, a trope, a “limited narrative unit”, and so on [29]. Besides, ever since the middle of the previous century, Harry Levin has been considering the expansion of the comparatist horizon through the interdisciplinary link between literary studies and other disciplines, including anthropology and psychology, within a broader “science of the imaginary” [30, 31]. Ultimately, intermedial comparatism can be defined and practiced as the result of two lines of inquiry: “comparative media” [2] and the “science of the imaginary” [30, 31].

4. A typology of invariants for a comparative media corpus

4.1 Literary, transcultural, and transmedial invariants

I propose to use the concept of the transmedial invariant as the analytical instrument for a corpus composed of works originating from several artistic fields. I will hereby outline the constants of discourse and the imaginary that are active in various art forms and artistic expressions (through discipline-specific tools), while they transcend the inevitable limitations and differences within esthetic media. Nowadays, comparative literature appears to seek a new balance between the theorist’s “geometrical spirit,” enticed by the pioneering of the new epistemes, and the researcher’s and educator’s “spirit of finesse,” attached to close reading, in line with the established tradition of humanities studies. A significant aspect of these new approaches is the

abandonment of the historical study of the relationships between facts—pertaining to the influences that shape the origin of the artwork—in favor of analyzing the “empirical evidence” instead [6]. More explicitly, “if, between two distinct literary systems, or between a literary work and that of another artistic medium,” there appears to be “a common element, without there being a relationship of dependency” between the two, “then a fundamental theoretical element will appear: that is, an invariant” [6]. César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Darío Villanueva view this as an “invariant of literature” [6].

However, I believe that it is much more: an interartistic and transmedial invariant, one that calls for an integrated and multisystemic analysis of different modes of artistic expression, codes, and media. I would like to highlight two types of transmedial invariants: discursive and thematic. As I understand them, the discursive invariants pertain to the discourse structure; they are abstract organization principles of language, shaping knowledge and experience through means and modes of expression specific to each medium. Although the means and modes vary from one medium to another, the principles—of the discursive categories—are general and transmedial in narration, rhetoric, illocutionary acts [15], enunciation (polyphony [12], irony), and so on. Among others, the category of thematic invariants includes, in my opinion, the “anthropological,” “ideological,” and “literary” invariants identified by Adrian Marino [20, 32], following his mentor, Etiemble. Marino confines himself to the field of literature, yet his proposed typology can also be applied to other media, in my opinion. I believe these (discursive and thematic) invariants are both transmedial and transcultural constants. They hold a broader anthropological relevance that allows for intercultural, particularly “interliterary” [6], comparisons among different literatures. I will attempt to provide further details and examples below.

According to Carl Gustav Jung, the archetypes of the collective unconscious are “*invariant* principles of the psyche,” “common to the entirety of mankind” [33]. In their nature as “innate categories,” they function as certain “profound psychological structures that govern the organization of human experience” from the very early days of life [33]. This layer of the invariants, which we can call *psycho-archetypal*, therefore precedes the inevitable cultural differences between individuals shaped by various socio-cultural settings. The existence of the psycho-archetypal invariants resonates with the ideas of “human nature,” “the psychic unity of mankind,” and “the universal patterns of culture,” which I mentioned earlier as I followed in the footsteps of Blumenbach, Bastian, and Wissler, among others. The psycho-archetypal foundation of the human species is a premise of the transcultural and transhistorical dimension of the creative artifacts seen in literature, arts, mythology, and religion. In other words, psycho-archetypal invariants allow for the manifestation of certain *transcultural* invariants, such as *mythical* and *literary* ones in particular. Moreover, the transcultural invariants can express themselves transmedially while adapting to different media and modes of communication. As a virtual and transpersonal structure, the psycho-archetypal invariant requires the support of representations (in visual arts, performance arts, literature, myth, ritual, etc.) in order to manifest itself.

For instance, the psycho-archetype of the Mother borrows a variety of forms and images, as seen in the mother, the goddess, Virgin Mary, “the church, the university, the town, the country, [...], the earth, the forest, the sea [...], the matter, [...], the moon” [33]. Herman Hesse’s Bildungsroman titled *Narziss und Goldmund* relies precisely on this discovery of the archetypal valence of motherhood and femininity that marks an artist’s creative maturation journey. In the protagonist’s agonizing vision at the end of the novel, the Mother’s image is muddled with the memory of the

women he loved, fragments of past experiences, and even Death itself. In my opinion, this scene can be interpreted as the literary representation of the archaic mythological image of the maternal archetype: it reflects the ambivalence of the primordial Mother, the Earth, as the source of life and universal grave. On the other hand, albeit rooted in the same archetypal foundation of femininity and developed in a culture deeply marked by religious faith and the adoration of Virgin Mary (as seen in the European medieval tradition), the motif of *donna angelicata* becomes one of the emblematic literary invariants of the Renaissance. In fact, this code of representation of femininity is a transcultural and transmedial invariant of the time, visible in many art forms in various corners of Europe, such as Dante's portrait of Beatrice (in *Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia*), the Renaissance sonnets, the image of the goddess in Botticelli's *Nascita di Venere*, and so on. Moreover, the transmedial and transcultural invariants are often complementary in their manifestation: for instance, the symbolism in various European literatures and impressionism in visual arts or music reveal a set of similar stylistic traits. Furthermore, in Lucian Blaga's view, "Chinese and French impressionist art are similar in their love for nuance and for the ineffable" [34].

4.2 Transmedial discursive invariants

In my suggested approach, these transmedial discursive invariants are the narrative structure, the actantial predication, and configuration, highlighted by the narrative semiotics (of Greimas [35–37] and Todorov [38], for instance), which add value to earlier theoretical writings, especially Propp's [39] narrative morphology. Tropes such as metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy appear, in turn, within both the verbal and visual [40] discourse: within the sign system of the visually or verbally impaired individuals [41], in the plastic arts [42], and dance [10, 43]. *These rhetorical or narrative categories—discourse universals—transcend the media differences, yet manifest themselves through modes of expression specific to each medium*: in the oral or written text; in music [44], film [45], graphics and caricature; in the *manga*, comics, and book illustrations; in dance [8, 10], video games, and *transmedia storytelling*; in the virtual hypertext with the role of a commercial; and so on.

Following in Propp's footsteps [39], the semiotics of narration and theater have tried to formalize the characters as well as the dramatic and epic events, thus identifying a range of their invariants ([36, 38, 46–48], see also Ref. [49]). Without a detailed revision of these semiotic models, I would nonetheless note that the Todorovian scheme of Boccaccio's [38] "archi-novella" can also be applied to other epic works [8]. For instance, the Milesian novellas are included in the ancient Latin novel category in terms of narrative structure, either in Petronius's *Satyricon* or Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Although they originate in different historical and cultural eras, these two types of novellas (the ancient Milesian and Boccaccio's Renaissance works) can be described according to the same narrative categories identified by Todorov and which create certain semio-narratological invariants. In my view [50], they are reducible to the same narrative scheme, to the same typological model, consisting of narrative "verbs" (actions), "proper nouns" (agents), and "adjectives" (emotions, traits, states of being)—all involved in the verbal-actional manifestation of the narrative "agents." I would say that the model proposed by Todorov holds an even broader relevance, both *transmedial* and *transcultural*. It can be applied not only to certain epic works from different literatures, as Todorov proposed, but also, in my opinion, to other media (where the content of certain literary works is eventually transferred).

I have illustrated in previous contributions (which I will not reiterate here) the adaptation of the narrative structure into different media, as well as the pertinence of the semiotic model of narration—a transmedial paradigm—in the analysis of a literary-choreographic [8, 10] and literary-cinematographic [9] corpus, respectively. Furthermore, I have also analyzed [10, 43] and exemplified the relevance of rhetorical tools in the description of the corporeal discourse, through a correlation between the communication codes of deaf-mute individuals, the choreographic language, and the literary discourse. I have concluded that a cross-artistic comparison can rely on a series of rhetorical invariants. For example, the “orientation” [51] metaphor is particularly relevant from the perspective of a transmedial rhetoric—both verbal and spatial-corporeal. Having studied “the gestural languages” of deaf-mute individuals, Danielle Bouvet identifies a specific category, that of the “abstract” signs. They attest to a symbolism founded on “the corporeal experience” [41]. Bouvet revisits Lakoff and Johnson’s concept of “the orientation metaphor” and applies it to gestural communication. According to Lakoff and Johnson [51], the orientation metaphors transpose certain notions in space. For instance, when it comes to temporality, the past can be designated through gestures behind the interlocutor, with the future in front of him. In other cultures, this transference is reversed. The semantics of the vertical clearly connotes both the positive ascending meaning and the opposite, the descending negative meaning, where “More is up” [41, 51]. Henceforth comes the metaphorical projection of certain quantitative or qualitative relationships. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “happiness is upwards”—on the spatial axis in the symbolism of emotions—while “sadness is downwards” [41, 51]. This affective topic goes across different media of expression and finds itself in the Romantic ballets, among others. It is brought to light in *Esmeralda*, a choreographic adaptation of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, one of Victor Hugo’s novels. (Choreography by I. Perro, after Marius Petipa, with music by C. Pugni. Performance at the State Theater in Petersburg, 1994). As a metaphorical image, the horizontal movement, forward/backward, signals a dissociation of primary emotions, attraction/repulsion [41]. (In the eponymous ballet, *Esmeralda* reveals her revulsion toward Frollo and her weakness for the fatidical Pheobus). From the same perspective of the transmedial rhetoric—both verbal and spatial-corporeal—I have previously [10, 43] analyzed a series of segments chosen from other performances.

4.3 The thematic transmedial invariants

4.3.1 *Ludus sacer, ludus aestheticus: An invariant in the history of arts*

From sacred to profane—from *ludus sacer* (the religious practices) to *ludus aestheticus* (the esthetic game)—translation is one of the transmedial and transcultural invariants identifiable in the secular evolution and refinement of various modes of artistic expression, including theatric, musical, and choreographic forms. I have proposed a semiotic analysis of this invariant in some previous contributions [10, 11] to which I will make only a few references regarding the working method. Up to a point, both verbal and non-verbal elements can be subjected to a similar semio-linguistic research path. To validate this conclusion, I have examined several semiotic concepts in a choreographic corpus, concepts that have traditionally been applied to a verbal subject. These include the desemanticization/resemanticization (an apt binary opposition to describe the transformation of choreographic expression together with other social structures); the *mutability* and *immutability* of the linguistic sign

(a paradoxical condition in the subsistence of not only the verbal language—as postulated by Saussure—but also other types of artistic expression, as seen in choreography); the Saussurean principles of *alteration through continuity* and the *displacement* of the semiotic relationship. In my opinion, the “displacement” of the original relationship (ritualistic, religious-magical) between the choreographic signifier and signified is a symptom of the gradual “aestheticization” or “theatricalization” [52, 53] of various artistic expressions, as I have shown in a previous contribution [11] regarding the dance of the Maenads in ancient Greece. These types of phenomena situated at the intersection between the religious and artistic fields demonstrate the mutability of the sign as a “displacement” of the relationship between “concept and sign” over time. As Saussure observes about verbal expression, the sign is in a state of “change because it continues;” its allegiance to the past is only “relative” [54].

In the same manner, one can describe similar phenomena in literature and other art forms by extrapolating the Saussurean semiological model emphasized above. Oftentimes, in cultural history, the ritualistic expression gradually becomes secular. Numerous artistic forms separate themselves from the syncretic ensemble of the rite, while a series of literary forms derive from ancient “sacred ‘histories,’” such as myths, initiation scenarios, and hymns dedicated to divinity [55]. Most likely, the Greek tragedy developed around the cult of Dionysus [56], while the classical Indian dance tells the sacred story of the ancient gods [57]. The epic poetry mostly undergoes a similar process, from myth to “desacralized history,” from “archetype” to the customized epic scheme [55].

I would say that an interesting example of resemantization, in the meaning highlighted above, is the myth and how it presents itself in literature, arts, and social life. According to André Dabezies (see Ref. [58]), a literary theme becomes a myth when it mirrors the mentality of an entire society. At a certain point, some representations of ancient origin, permeating Western culture as literary themes, regain their status as “fascinating models” characteristic of the myth, as remarks Dabezies (see Ref. [58]). In totalitarian ideologies, for instance, the Messiah myth reemerges in the form of the providential leader, depicted in propaganda as the sole possible savior [59]. On the other hand, a trend of “mythical messianism” [60] dominates pre-Romantic Europe at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries. In this context, Napoleon Bonaparte is regarded as a “historical embodiment” of the Promethean myth [60]. However, the “Titanian myths of the Romantic period: Prometheus or Jesus,” [60], also explored by Shelley and Goethe, among others, are reassimilated in simple literary themes at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the next. (It is illustrated in Gide’s *Prometheus Illbound*, which I examined in some of my previous works [50, 61] from a transmedial, “interliterary” [6], and “intersemiotic” [62] perspective).

The place of the Romantic Titan does not remain vacant, however. The heroic myth is replaced during La Belle Epoque, and later, it takes the form of an “intimist” and hedonistic mythology not only in literature but also in the collective mentality and social life: there is a “slow erosion of the Promethean myth in favor of the Dionysian myth” [60]. Along with “the Zolian denunciation of industrial society” [60] comes “the return of Dionysus” [63] in the (post)modern citadel. Thus, the archaic Dionysian myth becomes a minor literary theme for some time, but it regains its mythical magnitude as it surpasses the limits of the fictional game and captures the mentality of an entire society in day-to-day life. The recovery of the initial status, of the (temporarily lost) quasi-religious prestige, is, in my opinion, a form of resemantization of the myth. The circulation of the myth emphasizes the same polarity

between the religious and esthetic domains, between *ludus sacer* and *ludus aestheticus*—in other words, the same invariants I mentioned earlier in this chapter.

4.3.2 *The transmedial invariants of the imaginary: A few brief case studies*

Adrian Marino [20] conducts an inventory of several invariant types, “discourse” and “imagination constants,” such as anthropological, ideological, literary, and theoretical-literary. The first three categories are particularly relevant to the theoretical framework I propose here. The anthropological invariants mirror an ancestral layer of cultural representations common to all of humanity; they include images, symbols, myths, and sacred motifs. According to Jung, these coincidences of the “archetypal” order (for instance, the mythic stereotypes) occur as effects and symptoms of the “collective unconscious,” as already mentioned above. The ideological invariants constitute “ideas-force;” “common topoi,” of the various visions of the world; general human issues; ideological trends dominating a specific era, and so on. The *literary* invariants are evidence of certain universal human experiences and their representations in various literatures. For example, the Chinese poetry from the T’ang dynasty resembles the English Baroque poetry of the sixteenth century; hence, the Chinese elegy is comparable to the European one [20]. I believe, however, that the invariant types identified by Marino are not the monopoly of literature, as they also manifest through other modes of artistic expression. The following are just a few examples chosen from my class activities with my students that are designed to emphasize (what I would call) the transmedial aspect of the imaginary, through the circulation of the same topi in literature and other art forms.

4.3.2.1 *Homeric mimesis: A pre-Aristotelian transmedial principle*

In my view, one of the oldest epic works, *The Iliad*, captures a universal feature of the realistic esthetic that extends across literature, theater, and the visual arts. Homer intuited a principle of imitative visual creation through which he heralded the concept of *mimesis*, later defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics* in the field of literature. Homer notes that in an imitative creation, the representation competes with its referent through the “effect of the real” (as later defined by theoreticians) that it evokes. In *The Iliad*, the famous depiction of Achilles’s shield reveals a representation of the world of mortals against a cosmic backdrop. It is an *imago mundi*, a cosmo- and sociography *in nuce*. In my opinion, it also carries a component of *ars poetica* and *ekphrasis*—of visually realistic poetics—anticipating the Aristotelian *mimesis*. Homer captures nothing else but this “great wonder” of the effect of the real—of the medium of expression overshadowed by the fictional world it reflects or, more specifically, of the “gold” (from which the shield is made) replaced by the “earth” that the gifted blacksmith of the gods suggests by modeling the gold in the stunning Achilles’s shield [64].

4.3.2.2 *“The mystery of the soul”: A transmedial esthetics*

Canonical eschatological or apocryphal motifs, such as *The Last Judgment*, the “mystery of the soul” [65], and the “allegory of the soul” [65] in the Western European tradition, or the “aerial toll houses” [66] in the Eastern Church, particularly in the Romanian popular beliefs, are also found in the literature and paintings of Medieval Europe, profoundly imbued with a theocentric mentality. Iconography, architecture, and literature communicate through particular structures of the

era-specific imaginary that influence society as a whole [67], not just in the artistic domain. Medieval literature and visual arts share the educational (and even soteriological) function. *The Seven Deadly Sins* and the *Four Last Things* by Hieronymus Bosch, or *The Seven Deadly Sins or the Seven Vices* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, illustrate the concern of the Western Renaissance with this moral and eschatological theme. As in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the "iconography of the sin" [68] has a direct influence on the "iconography of Western infernos" [66] in the realm of plastic arts. *The Last Judgment*, painted on the western wall of Voroneț—a famous monastery in northeastern Romania—is an essentialized expression of the feudal Orthodox spirituality and art, much like how the *Divine Comedy* uniquely highlights the Western tradition. Here the religious iconography is a transmedial adaptation of a rich corpus of "afterlife narratives" [66]. In my opinion, a common core of transmedial invariants of the imaginary enables the correlation between literature and plastic arts, the verbal and the visual, and establishes what we could call *transmedial esthetics*.

4.3.2.3 A Baroque motif in literature and visual arts: *Memento mori*

A series of images and motifs obsessively permeates European literature and the visual arts toward the end of the Renaissance and during the Baroque period: *memento mori*, *vanitas vanitatum*, *carpe diem*, and *theatrum mundi*. The effigy of death seals the artistry of this epoch. In *Hamlet*, the prince looks with disgust at the clown's remains, a handful of bones that were once the source of endless jokes. The clown's skull is life's inevitable shadow. Through the anamorphic representation of a skull, the significance of this Shakespearean scene is captured in a painting by Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors* (1533). This is the signature of the nothingness beyond, the opposite of the futility suggested by the objects depicted in the upper half of the painting, which include musical instruments, measuring tools, a celestial globe, a terrestrial globe, and both secular and religious texts. These objects seem to connote the vanity of the attempt to capture the mystery of existence through all possible means: art or science, profane or sacred knowledge, action or contemplation. The anamorphosis of the skull delineates a boundary that separates the visible from the invisible, the world of the living from the world of the dead. Between the crucifix in the background—a seal of eternity, of infinity—and the anamorphosis of death stands man himself, the "ambassadors." Man is trapped between "two abysses: one of infinity and the other of nothingness," Blaise Pascal used to say. A few decades earlier, Holbein expressed the same topos through visual means. The elements of his painting transpose into iconic code the dominant features of the Baroque imaginary (*memento mori*, *vanitas vanitatum*, *carpe diem*). As in *Hamlet*, the key to the image appears to be in *The Ambassadors*, with the skull represented from an anamorphic perspective: the indication of a universal human destiny, the seal of vanity and vulnerability, the end of everything. Shakespeare's contemporary, the Italian artist Jacopo Ligozzi also painted allegories of death (*Respice finem*), allegories of vices, still lifes (*Natura morta macabra*), and portrait pairs created as a visual echo of the nostalgic *ubi sunt?*, especially regarding the question from the *Balad* by François Villon, *où sont les neiges d'antan?*

These motifs and symbols contribute to a Baroque transmedial imaginary that transcends literature and other arts. The same "Baroque vision of the world" [69] seeks suitable modes of expression in various artistic forms. Although the number of examples could increase, the conclusion would remain the same: between the literature and the visual arts of the Baroque period, there is a crisscross of an inventory of

symptomatic representations of the epoch's imaginary. I believe that this grammar of the imaginary can support an interartistic and intermedial comparatism.

5. Conclusion

The premises of comparatism are the “existence of a universal human condition” and the faculty of language [6], which is also generically human. The linguistic universals and the constants of the imagination—otherwise said, the discursive invariants (of form) and the thematic ones (of content), as I referred to them earlier—transcend various cultures and modes of expression in literature and the other arts. Therefore, the concept of the invariant holds transcultural and transmedial significance. Under the broader concept of *transmedial invariant*, I subsume those constants of discourse and imaginary that manifest themselves in various arts and artistic languages or, more generally, in different communication media, while going beyond the inevitable differences between the physical or esthetic environments. Essentially, I highlight two types of transmedial invariants: discursive (pertaining to the discourse structure) and thematic (content-related). In my opinion, the concept of invariant enables the inter- and transmedial comparison, a new field within comparative literature in the era of comparative media. Moreover, transmedial invariant is a concept on which relies (what I called earlier) a *multisystemic* and *translinguistic comparatism*, closely related to an “interartistic” one. Perhaps we are witnessing a translinguistic, transmedial, and multisystemic turning point in comparative literature in the era of new media, which involves new socio-cultural practices and new pedagogical methods.

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Chapter 3

The Surrealist Language: Principles and Techniques

Ovidiu Morar

Abstract

This study describes the main themes and techniques which characterize the Surrealist language. After a brief introduction to Surrealism major goals, postulated in A. Breton's manifestos, the analysis focuses on the problem of language, which seemed to be crucial for the Surrealists. Unlike other avant-garde movements, that considered this problem rather from an external perspective, for the Surrealists, the poetic act had to reveal a substance inherent to the primordial self. The main techniques used to achieve this goal, not only in poetry but also in visual arts, are presented in the main section of the paper, which also defines the key esthetic concepts of Surrealism such as the *image*, the *psychic automatism*, the *Surreality*, the *objective chance*, the *marvelous*, and the *convulsive beauty*. The study ends with a description of the primary mechanism of Surrealist writing, which was invariably applied to poetry, prose and theater as well; this unique mechanism giving all Surrealist texts an unmistakable mark. The conclusion emphasizes the importance and the posterity of Surrealism.

Keywords: surrealism, language, automatism, oneiric, image

1. Introduction: Surrealism goals

As a historical reality, Surrealism was born in Paris immediately after World War I as a form of protest against a dehumanized world that had made possible the horror of the war. Thus, all norms and values of that hypocrite (bourgeois) society had to be denounced as false and deeply immoral and, therefore, abolished as soon as possible. In the *Declaration of 27 January 1925*, the members of the Surrealist group proclaimed themselves “specialists in Revolt” and “determined to make a Revolution” in all human actions, as, in their opinion, Surrealism was not a new poetic form but “a cry of the mind turning back on itself and determined to break apart its fetters” ([1], pp. 262, 263). If initially that revolution was meant to be essentially spiritual, attempting “to provoke, from the intellectual and moral point of view, an attack of conscience, of the most general and serious kind” ([2], p. 123), later the Surrealist leaders came to the conclusion that this was possible only by a radical social revolution; in their opinion, the “liberation of the mind” was necessarily conditioned by the liberation of man, and that would explain their (temporary) sympathy for

Communism and Russian Revolution. The two fundamental postulates of Surrealism meant to unify (theoretically, at least) poetry and concrete social action were: “to change life” (Rimbaud) and “to transform the world” (Marx), axioms which had to be perceived as “a single key word”, for every poet had to overcome “the depressing idea of an irreparable divorce between action and dream” ([3], p. 170).

Despite its esoteric appearance of a secret doctrine destined only for a small group of sectarians, Surrealism had little to do with mysticism since it was determined to find the so-called “Surreality” within the very boundaries of the visible reality, that is, of the “daily marvelous”. As its leader, André Breton declared in 1934 that Surrealism was conceived as an attempt not to transcend the real but to deepen and appropriate it, to take knowledge, as deep and passionate as possible, of the sensitive world [4]. In other words, it was about a new mode of knowledge, subjective par excellence, considered to be superior to the scientific one because, in the footsteps of Bergson, the reason was thought to be incapable to grasp, in the universality of its rigid concepts, the unicity of individual phenomena. On the basis of Freud’s psychoanalysis, the Surrealist group, founded around 1920, initially intended to discover the individual unconscious in order to gain complete knowledge of man and, implicitly, to liberate him from the repressing taboos of an alienating society. In the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in 1924, André Breton identified “surrealism” with “psychic automatism in its pure state”, in a well-known definition:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express-verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner-the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life ([5], p. 26).

By analogy with Freud’s method of free associations, by which a patient in a totally passive state (initially under hypnosis) was asked to speak freely, removing thus the censorship exerted by the Superego in order to eliminate all psychic tensions and to obtain the final catharsis, the Surrealist method postulated by Breton was aiming primarily to liberate imagination from all constraints. The artistic images obtained by that method were thought to be much purer and truer than any others logically premeditated, facilitating thus much more the knowledge of the *Id*. Incidentally, automatism had been postulated also by Jung, who had sustained that the images deposited in the individual unconscious had not to be judged but accepted the way they appeared in the conscience in order to be deciphered afterwards, for they were in fact vehicles of essential messages coming from the collective unconscious. Hence, the artist’s role was basically to force (systematically) the images coming from the darkness of the unconscious to come out in order to be analyzed in the cold light of reason, and that was supposed to be the task of hermeneutics.

While recognizing Freud’s exceptional merit of having made the first step towards the liberation of imagination, Breton emphasized, following in his footsteps, the importance of the dream in human existence, and claimed he believed “in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so

contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality” ([5], p. 14), and this task had to be allocated to the poet. It is clear the Surrealist leader was preoccupied in this first programmatic text to apply Freud’s method (which he pretended he had experimented himself as a doctor to the treatment of insane patients during the war) to the literary speech: thus, he tried to set up a new poetics whose main points were: the automatism, the dream-like image, the daily marvelous and the anti-realism.

Extended to visual arts as well, the technique of Surrealist automatism had been already experimented by Breton and Philippe Soupault as early as 1919, in the collective writing *Les Champs magnétiques* (Magnetic Fields), and in the first manifesto, it was described *in extenso*, as a sort of recipe for every Surrealist writer. Its aim was to reveal the existence in embryo of a mysterious text produced in the obscure depths of the unconscious, which was supposed to be much more authentic than the conscious speech act, since it was a complete expression of thought (considered, in Freudian terms, to be a voice of the *Id*), in the absence of any censorship from the *Superego*. (From Breton’s point of view, there is a sharp contrast between *thought* and *reason*.)

Therefore, automatic writing could be defined as a *text-existence*, that is, a text that reveals all hidden secrets of the being. Moreover, a text of this kind, due to its irrational character, either calls for other texts that have the purpose of decoding it; it generates meaning beyond its author’s will, who is nothing but an impersonal scribe who only *transcribes* the text dictated by the mysterious voice, without operating any modification imposed by reason’s censorship ([6], p. 143, my translation). The meaning is not given *a priori* but is produced by the multiple combining possibilities of the words, which are grouped according to their secret affinities, and these combinations might be nothing but projections of the scribe’s unconscious desires. “Words make love”, said Breton ([7], p. 126, my translation), while Louis Aragon maintained that the Surrealist text, although apparently subjective, had a much higher degree of objectivity than the common texts, maybe even *the absolute* objectivity, since it was a photography of the individual unconscious, which on its turn was nothing but an avatar of the “universal consciousness”:

Surrealism is not a refuge against style. Both form and content are not indifferent. The meaning is formed beyond the one who writes. Words come to signify something. A word may very well replace another, in certain physical circumstances of homology, since very often the hand writes a different word from the one the experimenter hears as being dictated to him, so that the meaning of the phrase is overthrown without disturbing any how the one who writes, therefore one might say this crystalized meaning is indifferent, since it implies no responsibility. Bad error. The meaning of the words is not a simple dictionary definition. It is known that they bear a meaning in every syllable, in every letter. Thus, the content of a Surrealist text is of greatest interest, it is what gives it the precious character of a revelation ([8], p. 297, my translation).

2. Surrealism and language

It follows that, from the Surrealist perspective, the problem of language was of greatest importance: as Breton pointed out, Surrealism was “almost exclusively concerned with the question of language”, because the general problem it was trying to solve was “*the problem of human expression in all its forms*” ([2], p. 151). After having discovered a serious language crisis, which in fact was a symptom of a more profound one (of a spiritual nature), Surrealism struggled to restore its lost dignity. As an

organized movement, it was born, as Breton said in 1953, “of a far-reaching operation having to do with language” ([9], p. 297). At the beginning, as the first manifesto pointed out, the products of psychic automatism revealed no esthetic concern, since their only purpose was to reveal a “state of grace” that would have been inevitably lost the moment when elaboration had become conscious. The point at issue was “the rediscovery of the secret of a language whose elements would then cease to float like jetsam on the surface of a dead sea”, and to do this “it was essential to wrest these elements away from their increasingly narrow utilitarian usage, this being the only way to emancipate them and restore all their power” ([9], p. 297).

One may notice that the Surrealist project had exactly the same starting point as the other avant-garde movements of the twentieth century: the revelation of a profound and implacable alienation of language determined a natural urge to recapture its primordial purity. Like the Futurist “words in liberty” or the Dadaist “chance”, the Surrealist automatic writing, appealing to all polysemantic resources of language, aimed at the “apprehension of its primordial substance, in the alchemical sense of the term”, therefore, as Breton pointed out: “The word must be considered in itself, as it represents, perhaps, everything” ([7], p. 127, my translation). Consequently, the word had to be distorted from its essential signifying purpose because only in this way it was able to come to an unexpected, new life. Unlike other avant-garde movements, though, Surrealism had no intention to be a new literary school and hence to create a new poetic language (inevitably conventional), but its purpose was to reveal, by the common instruments of artistic communication, the mysterious depths of the being. Thus, it rejected either the destruction of syntaxis or the radical graphical and lexical experiments of the Futurists and Dadaists. Language, with its common structural proprieties, was thought to be an essential part of the being and to ignore these proprieties was to distort poetry from its fundamental (ontological) goal ([10], my translation). The poetic act could be neither an abstract linguistic exercise, like Mallarmé’s experiments, nor a simple play with words, like Dada poetry; on the contrary, it ought to reveal a substance inherent to the primordial self.

Nevertheless, one can detect an essential difference between the Futurist “words in liberty” and the Surrealist words that “make love”. If for the Futurists the word stood for a reality in itself, since poetry was born of a violent clash of the words, as a dramatic attempt to break all the barriers of language, the Surrealist “automatic messages” had to be perceived as perfectly finished linguistic structures, of an organic character (Breton said in his first manifesto that before falling asleep he had perceived certain grammatically correct phrases that had been “knocking on the window”). Words were no longer conceived to combine themselves by external chance, like in Dada poems, but by a mysterious internal law, and out of these unconscious verbal associations new images were to be born, with a much greater power of suggestion than that of the consciously made metaphors.

3. Surrealist techniques

It is known that the first examples of automatic writing were the texts produced by Breton and Soupault as early as 1919, published under the symbolic title *Les Champs magnétiques* (probably the “magnetic fields” of the unconscious, which are structured after certain constant paths, similar from a subject to another; and that could explain why it would be almost impossible to identify the author in each particular case). As Breton was to say in his first manifesto, the texts in question showed “a remarkable

analogy”, and the only differences he could grasp were due to the particular “temper” of each author. Anyway, their poetic importance was doubtlessly exceptional, namely in revealing an “extreme degree of immediate absurdity” ([5], p. 26) that opened virtually infinite possibilities in poetry, as in the following example:

Cute firedamp explosions are being prepared while, their head bowed, elegant women are going on a journey to the centre of the earth. Big portions of the created space are heading at high speed to the pole. The white bears' clock indicates the hour of the ball ([5], p. 26).

What strikes the reader most in this text is the sharp contrast between its formal normality (the syntax and punctuation are spotless) and the logical incoherence of the content. The effect produced upon him is, by no means, disconcerting because he suddenly feels he faces a reality familiar and, at the same time, mysterious and uncanny. Otherwise, this was exactly what Breton postulated in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), saying that the fundamental scope of Surrealism was to provoke an emotional shock, “an attack of conscience, of the most general and serious kind” ([2], p. 123); and that was the condition *sine qua non* of entering that state of grace called *surreality* a mysterious territory where the old antinomies of the spirit were supposed to be completely abolished in a perfect coincidentia oppositorum:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. From this it becomes obvious how absurd it would be to define Surrealism solely as constructive or destructive: the point to which we are referring is a fortiori that point where construction and destruction can no longer be brandished one against the other ([2], p. 124).

In Freud's terms, the ultimate goal of this approach was to liberate the *self* (i.e. the imagination) from all repressions, and to obtain eventually total domination of the *pleasure principle* over the *reality principle*. As Breton maintained, art, which had been for centuries constrained to listen only to the demands of the *ego* and *superego*, was now keen to explore in all directions the immense and almost virgin territories of the *self*. In turn, the artist had to renounce all pretensions of originality and even his personality, listening only to that mysterious inner voice that was perhaps able to communicate a message from the collective unconscious. Lautréamont's poetic principle: “Poetry should be made by all and not by one” became for the Surrealists a watchword: as Paul Éluard said, real poetry should be able to purify all the people, and afterwards “all ivory towers will be demolished, all words will be sacred, and man, eventually connected to reality, which is his own, should only close his eyes to open the gates of the marvellous” ([11], p. 10, my translation).

Naturally, automatic writing did not remain for the Surrealists the only method of investigation into the self. At first, following the example of the poet Robert Desnos, the practice of automatic writing was extended to visual arts (Hans Arp had created automatic drawings since 1916); and from this respect, Breton was to assert that between poetry and painting, there was no difference of substance since both were trying to exclude the external object in itself and to perceive nature only from the perspective of the inner world of consciousness: the poetic language, anti-mimetic par excellence, had to be universal ([12], pp. 131–136). Thus, the painter Joan Miró was

to create “poems-paintings”, the poet Ilarie Voronca and the painter Victor Brauner would invent, in 1924, the “pictorial poetry” ([13], p. 262), André Breton together with Tristan Tzara and the painters Yves Tanguy, Victor Brauner and Jacques Hérold would produce a series of collective drawings that had the starting point in the game called *Le Cadavre Exquis* (Exquisite Corpse), and in 1935 would declare:

Thus, I for my part believe today in the possibility and the great interest of the experiment that consists of incorporating objects, ordinary or not, within a poem, or more exactly of composing a poem in which visual elements take their place between the words without ever duplicating them. It seems to me that the reader-spectator may receive quite a novel sensation, one that is exceptionally disturbing and complex, as a result of the play of words with these elements, namable or not. To aid the systematic derangement of all the senses, a derangement recommended by Rimbaud and continuously made the order of the day by the Surrealists, it is my opinion that we must not hesitate to bewilder sensation and such an undertaking might well have this result ([12] p. 138).

The aleatory combined words after the method of automatic writing were supposed to produce a state of anxiety similar to that generated by watching Max Ernst's *collages*. In 1925, Ernst invented the technique of the *frottage*, which he considered to be “the true equivalent of what we already know as *automatic writing*” ([14], p. 64): the procedure consisted in placing a piece of paper on the boards and rubbing it with blacklead so as to obtain a tracing, and in painting by scraping a canvas covered in wet paint, or by placing it on a rough surface, and the author justified this technique by saying that the artist is a spectator at the birth of his work and observes the phases of its development ([14], p. 65). Other similar techniques were the *grattage* (Esteban Frances), which consisted in the random distribution of colors on a surface (of wood, glass, etc.) and their random grating with a razor blade, the *rayogramme* (Man Ray), that is, a photography obtained from the interposition of an object between a source of light and the sensitive paper, the *solarization* (Man Ray), which consisted in the fortuitous re-exposure of a negative during development in order to produce unexpected light and shade effects, the *fumage* (Wolfgang Paalen), created by the rapid movement of a flame on a surface (paper, glass or a painted canvas) in order to obtain vague, mysterious shadows, *decalcomania* (Oscar Dominguez), which consisted in pressing black paint between two thin sheets of paper, the *cubomania* (Gherasim Luca), a version of the collage in the form of rectangular cut-ups of pre-existent images of women, rearranged randomly in order to obtain, as the author said, “the landscape of desire” ([15], p. 3), etc.

Eventually, all these experiments had in common the intention to provoke the “objective chance”, which was defined by Engels as “the form of manifestation of necessity”, and by Breton (who tried to reconcile Engels with Freud) as “the form of manifestation of an external necessity that makes its way to the human unconscious”, or as “the encounter between an external causality and an internal finality” (Breton maintains) that between those two “causal series”, natural and human—there are “subtle, fugitive and unsettling connections that sometimes cause genuine electric discharges” ([16], p. 31, my translation). In other words, the “objective chance” would be any external phenomenon able to produce an emotion in the subject by revealing a secret (unconscious) desire which has found thus its objective manifestation. And, since desire (or the *libido*, according to Freud) is, as Breton pointed out, the “common

ground of the spirit” and even “the only resort of the world” ([16], p. 128, my translation), the ultimate goal of these experiments was to free the ways in which desire could manifest.

Another way to provoke the objective chance were the collective games which, like the automatic writings, were meant to set connections between the paths of the unconscious of different subjects. Otherwise, games had a central part in the Surrealist activity for beyond their appearance of gratuitous fun they had an experimental character. Games do create a sui generis causality which tends to substitute the universal causality, and if Breton insisted so much on the serious character of the games was because he hoped to obtain from them exactly the same thing he was expecting from the mere Surrealist activity: to reach that “supreme point” where all contradictions would have been abolished (the Surrealist game was considered to be a part of the “Great Game”) ([17], p. 190, my translation). The most notorious Surrealist game was *Exquisite Corpse* in which a sentence or a drawing was obtained by the contribution of several subjects who were adding in turn one element without seeing what the others were doing. They obtained this way absurd sentences such as: “The exquisite corpse drank new wine”, or “The winged steam seduces the locked bird”, whose main quality was to produce by chance strange images with a much greater poetic power than those consciously created. The same purpose was aimed by the game of questions and answers at random (e.g., Giacometti: “What is violet?” Breton: “A double moustache”. Breton: “What is art?” Giacometti: “A white shell in a basin with water”), about which Breton said he had always considered to be, from the poetic perspective, “the most fabulous source of unlikely images” ([16], p. 128, my translation).

Although in general the Surrealists did not systematically practice the word games, one may notice that many of their poems are based exclusively on them. For instance, certain poems by Robert Desnos were created by the transposition of some consonants after the principle of alliteration while others applied the principle of homophony to letters, and others (like *Langage cuit*) were produced exclusively from musical notes or tautologies. Such experiments tried to prove that language has a life of its own, independent of the speaker’s will (since words are arbitrarily combined), and its essential aim excludes any utilitarian function. After Desnos’ example, Gherasim Luca created poems from random plays of homophonies, the most famous example being *Passionnément* (Passionately) which starts from the repetition of the word *pass*:

pass pass passpasspass passes
pass pass passes pass passpass
pass passes false pass passes
paspaspass passes falsely
false falses falsely passes
paspasp pass papa passes
bad papa falsely passes
pass pass passes paspass passes
passes passes he passes he pas passes
he passes pass on pope
of pope on pope pas pass he passes
passpasses passee peesee pee on
pope on papa on the on the on
the pipe of papa of pope pee in mass (...) ([18], p. 421, my translation)

Of special interest in the question of revealing the objective chance is the *Surrealist object*, defined by Salvador Dali as “an object which lends itself to a minimum of mechanical functions and is based on phantoms and representations liable to be provoked by the realization of unconscious acts” ([19], p. 289). A fundamental role in this typically Surrealist creation played Marcel Duchamp’s *readymades* which were nothing but ordinary manufactured objects (such as a bicycle wheel or even a porcelain urinal) invested with esthetic function due only to their pure banality; uprooted, removed from their usual context for which they had been made, in other words liberated from any utilitarian goal, they were raised to the status of objects of art just because of their absolute gratuity. Following Duchamp’s example, the Surrealists dedicated a genuine cult to such objects. Breton maintained that natural objects had not only an existence in itself, but the shape of the most common of them was to create a “riddle-image” capable to evoke to the watcher “the only real object, that is the object of his desire” ([16], p. 128, my translation). Consequently, the most common objects and even natural ones were to be converted in genuine works of art either by simple modifications or by placing them in unusual contexts, like in the case of Breton’s *object poems* in which certain objects were incorporated in a poetic text so as to create a unitary ensemble. Inspired by Giacometti, Salvador Dali invented the *symbolically functioning object*, which he defined as an object produced by an “objective perversion” and meant to express a repressed desire or to allow a compensatory satisfaction of the libido ([14], p. 148). On his turn, Gherasim Luca introduced, in the book *Le Vampire passif* (1945), the *objectively offered object*, a kind of object made while thinking of the person to whom it was intended; in this way, the object could have been used as a vehicle for sentimental or intellectual exchanges and could have been interpreted like a rebus ([14], p. 149). Luca intended to offer such objects, which were supposed to reveal perverse, sadistic or even incestuous impulses, to persons he admired, like Breton and to close friends, like Victor Brauner or Jacques Hérold, for he really believed in the magical force of those objects (for instance, he thought the object offered to Brauner had produced, by *envoûtement*, the death of his father). What Gherasim Luca tried to reveal in this way was the existence of the *objective chance*, conditioned only by desire and supposed to provoke “mysterious encounters either between human beings or between human beings and animals”, encounters based on an “active collective unconscious” which had been previously revealed only by dreams; thus, the *objectively offered object* was meant to create the possibility of intermediating direct daily relations between human beings which “at a minimum attempt of interpretation would prove to be as subversive, strange and revealing as those happened in dreams” ([20], pp. 3, 2, my translation).

Nevertheless, the Surrealist objects had not only the magic function of adjuvants, of occult mediators between humans, but they themselves seemed to be animated by a secret life, since they were exercising one to another unexplained attractions and/or terrors. It seems that the Surrealists adopted not only in the figurative sense Lautréamont’s esthetic principle: “beautiful as a chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella”, which otherwise can be considered the mere key to understanding Surrealist art. Applied to poetic language, this meant the production of unusual, incongruent images, while in the case of visual art the principle in question could not be applied but literally. Thus, many of the compositions produced by Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Victor Brauner, Jules Perahim, etc. emphasized such bizarre matings between objects, in equally strange contexts, culminating in impossible metamorphoses after the model of Arcimboldo’s heteroclit figures. The key to understanding the mechanism of these visual works can be found in Max Ernst’s interpretation of Lautréamont’s postulate:

A ready-made reality, whose naive purpose seems to have been fixed once and for all (an umbrella), finding itself suddenly in the presence of another very distant and no less absurd reality (a sewing machine), in a place where both must feel out of their element) (on an operating table) will, by this very fact, escape its naive purpose and lose its identity; because of the detour through what is relative, it will pass from absolute falseness to a new absolute that is true and poetic: the umbrella and the sewing machine will make love. The way this procedure works seems to me to be revealed in this very simple example. A complete transmutation followed by a pure act such as love will necessarily be produced every time that the given facts – the coupling of two realities which apparently cannot be coupled on a plane which apparently is not appropriate to them – render conditions favourable ([19], p. 275).

Not only painters would apply *ad litteram* this principle. Many Surrealist writings would exclusively describe such “erotic” encounters provoked by objective chance between human beings and/or strange objects animated by a secret life, or delirious metamorphoses on the principle that anything can be transformed into anything. For instance, a poetic prose by Gellu Naum entitled *Medium* (1945) speaks of a certain “demonism” of objects that paradoxically come to exercise either one to another or to human beings an aggressive force, becoming this way genuine instruments of Evil. There are, thus, *ephiatic objects* which act like vampires (cameras that “suck images”, lanterns that “suck our shadow with a calm vampirism”, blankets that “press our chest like the purest succubus”, etc.); and any object whose shape reminds more or less of an animal is a *lycanthropic object*, that is a carnivore transformed, by a secret metempsychosis, into an apparently inanimate object that conserves though its whole inner aggressivity: “it howls its demonism which won’t hesitate to become manifest” ([21], pp. 120–124, my translation). Of a similar “demonism” spoke Dolfi Trost in his *Ocular texts*, which otherwise bear significant titles like: *Flammable Substance Engulfs with Pleasure a Rapier and a Mask*, *Killer Wig Stifles a Silk Stocking*, *Stones Rape Crystalized Fossils*, etc. Another “ocular text”, equally bizarrely entitled *Elephant Herds Indignantly Reject the Wood*, begins in this way:

*The forest is brought down to the ground by the rush of elephants.
But in the place of the trees appear abject cylindrical objects on which ants and
nocturne butterflies swarm in tandem.*

*Under the conical shadow, nurses carry beds on which decrepit old men come to
agonize, uttering curses and injuries against nature.*

*Then, in a deadly silence, the beds are lifted up with the help of primitive winches.
We observe a submarine stillness and we enter the realm of sewing needles, of grafting
knives, of glass eyes and of sponges who, having nothing to lose, play the victim
([22], pp. 181, 182, my translation).*

Beyond the unexplainable aggressiveness exerted by every element of this hallucinating universe, the main characteristic of Surrealist writings resides in their mere visuality (as the title chosen by Trost for his texts suggests), since they are in fact an indefinite succession of images that proliferate *ad libitum* in the complete absence of a logical nexus between them. Thus, the effect that this kind of writing provokes to the reader is similar to that produced by a Surrealist movie, for both are dictated by image, namely by that image-projection of an oneiric vision. For instance, the movie *Un chien*

andalou (1928) by Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali is a simple display of delirious (and, naturally, shocking) images, unified only by the force of the couple Eros/Thanatos: a woman's eye cut by a razor, a hand invaded by ants, a woman fascinated by a cut hand found by chance on the street, a woman's breast transformed into buttocks to be touched by a man, the man dragging behind a piano with carcasses of mules on it, books transformed into guns, the man's mouth replaced by a lock of hair, and, eventually, the man and the woman buried in sand at the mercy of the burning sun and of swarms of insects. It is obvious that the authors of the movie wanted to transpose in cinematographic images the *manifest content* of a dream, which was the main goal of Surrealist art.

Due to the great influence of Freud's psychoanalysis (and, at the same time, in consonance with the old alchemists' practices), Surrealism placed in the core of its artistic pursuit the exploration of dreams, for these would have offered, in Breton's opinion, "the only way of understanding man's fundamental aspirations and immediate needs" ([3], p. 27, my translation). In fact, one may even say that Surrealism was born as a direct consequence of this concern since, as Breton pointed out, his first automatic texts written together with Soupault tried to willingly reproduce the mood in which the phrases he pretended to have heard before falling asleep had been formed (the first phrase was: "There is a man cut in two by a window".) As early as 1919, he would have heard several bizarre messages of that kind, which appeared to be dictated by a mysterious voice and had a perfect syntax but at the same time were rationally unexplainable – and just due to this fact he saw them as "first-rate poetic elements" ([3], p. 27, my, translation). In order to recapture the mood in which they had been formed, it was enough to ignore the outer world and to attain complete ataraxia, according to the recipe proposed in the first Surrealist manifesto. At that very moment, the gates of marvelous were opened and the "legions of images" could swarm impetuously and become poetry.

Like the practice of automatic writing, the narration of dreams aimed at a knowledge of the self as complete as possible and, meanwhile, represented an unexhausted source of images for poetry. Following Breton's example, who narrated his first dreams in the magazine *Littérature*, the Surrealists would systematically tell their dreams in public and sometimes would even try to interpret them, that is to reveal their *latent content*, after Freud's method, although most of the times they would reject any rational explanation. Otherwise, their main reproach to psychoanalysis would refer precisely to its rationalist and dogmatic character in the attempt to bring to light the obscure impulses of the unconscious, with the only purpose of finding the key of conscious behavior in order to reintegrate the subject into social life. Unlike Surrealism, psychoanalysis did not recognize the primacy of the unconscious over the conscious, as its only scope was to assure the harmonious functioning of the two inseparable components of the human psyche. Moreover, psychoanalysis considered the practice of psychic automatism a means not of releasing thought but of disintegrating personality. As far as we know, Freud renounced quite soon to hypnosis, which he substituted with the method of free associations. The Surrealists, on the other hand, would obstinately search the enter into the realm of dreams, because there they thought to be the real existence, uncensored and unfalsified by any kind of coercive norms (notorious are, for instance, the deliberately provoked hypnotic trances, during which a subject was determined to communicate, as a medium, messages received from the other world, the most famous case being that of Robert Desnos). The "surreality" they were searching for, like a new Graal or like the philosopher's stone, was a sort of "absolute reality" (although accessible to everyone), in which dream and daily reality were to eventually fusion in a magical wedding.

An interesting example of Surrealist criticism of the psychoanalysis theory can be found in the writings of Dolfi Trost published in Romania during the period 1945–1947. For instance, in *Vision dans le crystal* (Vision in the Crystal), 1945, Trost accused psychoanalysis of indirectly supporting social oppression by transforming man's natural desires into “sad maladies”, and he consequently proposed (in *R's Dreams*) a new method of dream interpretation called *oneiromancy*, a paradoxical combination of Freud's method and Tzara's recipe of Dada poetry: since the erotic aspect of the manifest content of dreams was obvious, every symptomatic phrase of them could be interpreted by using a manual of erotic pathology opened by chance with a knife. The author sustained that he had managed to reconcile in this way external (purely mechanical) chance, considered by Dadaists to be the only mechanism of reality, with inner chance, namely of the unconscious.

In another essay published in 1947, *Le même du même* (The Self of the Self), Trost maintains that every dream is erotic in its latent content, and that its manifest content is but the sublimation of a repressed desire. In his opinion, psychoanalysis was wrong because it tried to reduce the erotic elements found in dreams to symbols that could be rationally explained; however, the existence of these symbols can be perceived only from the conscious' perspective, and erotic desire is “vaster than that of the conscious”. Thus, if a woman sees in a dream a moonbeam it means the moonbeam has the concrete function of an erotic object, not only symbolically or metaphorically. Therefore, “the content of dreams should be considered *directly*, and not by analogy” because “it does not hide an erotic subject, on the contrary, it reveals it”. This is why the signification of dreams cannot be found by rational methods but everyone should interpret his own dreams himself, and the only “objective and scientific” method to do that would be their “poetic treatment”. Since dream “advances to perfect insanity”, it results that the only appropriate method of interpretation would be the psychotic discourse, that is the delirium of interpretation. Trost further applies this method to a collection of hallucinatory stories called *Le plaisir de flotter. Rêves et délires* (The Pleasure of Floating. Dreams and Deliriums), which begins like that:

Ready to go, the young woman cannot escape the madness of waiting, aggravated by that present offered to her on the way out. Beside her, on his feet, a very scrupulous man barely represses the interest inspired by her. He long tries on the shoes a young girl has put at his feet: the girl is absolutely charming, she could be the model of a dreamer. The expression fits like a shoe gets around silently above the voice of those who are dreaming.

Hesitating between a passionate unconscious impulse and some opposite reflections, the young woman feels now in mortal danger, but meanwhile struggles hard to save the man from certain death. She reviews herself, frightened, at the level of some crypts. The primitive desire, under indecipherable symbols, betrays a staunch and temporary relationship; she is about to give herself to the man. One may notice, in the centre of this scene, some models who unconsciously attract solicitations and allusions. The young woman suggests, by a lost glance followed by a silent move of the lips, that the miserable look of that man elongates his face. The quick forgetting of that moment is due to a trail of subtle powder that spreads all over the place: the old desire is now reversed, but the divergence does not occur yet. From now on she takes into account some contradictory tendencies. The ornamentation of the décor gives advantage to the couple walking down the stairs, and the young woman, closely surrounded by a few men, sees herself defended like by some kind of ropes. The entering of the rival hated

of jealousy is suddenly revealed by an aggressive appetite. The feverish ferocity of the constructions is exhibited at the entrance of the ballroom ([23], pp. 500, 501, my translation).

It is actually notorious for the interest constantly shown by the Surrealists to the speech of the insane. In the absence of moral or psychological censorship, speech, just like in the case of Surrealist automatism, gains absolute liberty as well as the ability to express the whole being: the insane can be seen as the one who has managed to liberate himself from social oppression, that is a *rebel* par excellence. Meanwhile, since he has broken all contacts with society, the insane gains instead access to a superior reality, inaccessible to conventional people uprooted in their daily habits, and becomes thus an *inspired* (such is the hero of Breton's novel, *Nadja*, an alienated woman with miraculous powers, that is a *visionary*). From this, the Surrealists would draw the conclusion that there is no difference between poetry and insanity, as well as between poetry and dreams. As Matthews pointed out: "all forms of surrealist poetic expression can be regarded as manifesting some form of interpretative delirium", and that one can find a close resemblance between the fruits of automatism and the effects of *hypomania*, an illness "marked by an acceleration and extension of the subject's stream of thought, bringing about rapid mental associations" ([24], pp. 93, 94). From Breton's point of view, hysteria is not a pathological phenomenon at all but "a supreme form of expression", and the rejection of reason, called *acephalia*, became thus for the Surrealists a major theme, treated almost programmatically, as a drawing by André Masson from 1934 proves ([25], p. 320). Famous indeed were the five essays of simulating mental illnesses such as mental retardation, acute mania, general paralysis, interpretative delirium and dementia praecox, which Breton and Éluard grouped in a chapter of the challenging book *L'Immaculée Conception* (The Immaculate Conception); as Breton ironically pointed out, these essays were meant to reveal "maladies virtual in each one of us [that] could replace most advantageously the ballad, the sonnet, the epic, the poem without head or tail, and other decrepit modes". It is again emphasized here the old antithesis between *literature*, that is a conventional, specialized, discourse meant to please the audience, and *poetry*, that is a free speech meant to completely express the being. Consequently, all traditional literary species were considered the equivalent of the original sin because they would falsify authentic experiences, preventing the attainment of poetic grace. An "immaculately conceived" poem would mean a poem uncorrupted by the original (literary) sin of transforming art from a means of expressing life into an end in itself ([24], p. 72).

The plastic equivalent to these texts which were trying to prove that reason could use all forms of insanity on behalf of poetry is the *paranoiac-critical method* invented by Salvador Dalí to obtain spectacular artistic results by lucid simulation of mental disorder. Defined by the author as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the interpretative critical association of phenomena which lead to delirium", or as an "interpretative delirium that has a systematic structure", this method allows its subject to act as if under the influence of a mental illness while remaining fully aware of what it was going on ([14], p. 100). It is in fact about using the *trompe l'oeil* technique, namely the *anamorph*, in order to produce representations of phantasms of the unconscious (Dalí would speak later of a "psychic anamorph", defined thus: "The instantaneous reconstitution of the desire by its refraction in a cycle of memories" ([14], p. 103). This method is meant to be used, as the author points out in the article *L'Âne pourri*, published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, for "the

representation of an object which, without the least figurative or anatomical modification, is at the same time the representation of another object that is absolutely different, one that also is free of any type of deformation or abnormality that would reveal some sort of artificial arrangement” ([19], p. 274). The birth of the double image is possible “thanks to the violence of paranoiac thought which has slyly and skilfully used the necessary quantity of pretexts, coincidences, etc., exploiting them so as to cause the appearance of the second image which, in this case, takes the place of the obsessive idea”. The double image (for instance, the image of a horse that is at the same time the image of a woman) could be prolonged, continuing the “paranoiac process”, as the existence of another obsessive idea is enough to cause a third image to appear (the image of a lion, for example) and so on until a number of images, “limited only by the degree of paranoiac capacity of thought”, converge ([19], p. 274).

What the Surrealists were trying to imply by publishing this kind of production was that poetic inspiration has nothing to do with logical thought and the authentic poet should be able to attain that essentially sur-rational state of grace in which all pre-established conventions and norms are abolished. That can explain their disdain for official consecration and for the poets who were seeking literary fame while accepting, inevitably, some esthetic and even moral compromises for obtaining the social status of writer (notorious is the pamphlet *Un cadavre* (A Corpse) published by the French Surrealists on the death of Anatole France, considered to be the official writer par excellence.)

Nevertheless, Surrealism could not have remained indefinitely beyond any esthetic concern, as its first manifesto stipulated. After all, the Surrealist group was, with few exceptions, made of poets and artists whose main interest was to find a certain audience. Breton himself was incidentally forced to admit later that perfect automatism was practically impossible since it was not easy for the authors to abandon their “poetic” obsessions, completely denying literariness. And when those who were practising automatic writing began to “arrange their material in a poem”, as Breton noticed, that is, to write in verses, accepting thus an old literary convention, it became clear their intention was to give a literary form to that material. Marcel Raymond even drew the conclusion that Surrealist texts did not reflect the real image of psychic automatism but, on the contrary, due to the literary training of their authors, doubtlessly impressed by the memory of their numerous Romantic and post-Romantic readings, they looked rather like “products of culture, and of the most advanced one”; therefore, the Surrealists were not able to produce but “the unleashing of rather superficial mechanisms, the propagation of a school of *literary* thought, almost always ‘guided’, despite the author’s will” ([26], p. 351).

Obviously, with the passing years, the notion of automatism suffered inevitably a change, a “resize”, as the Surrealists began to accept its use in their literary or visual compositions “with certain premeditated intentions” ([27], p. 176, my translation). Consequently, they gradually abandoned the naturalistic transcription of dreams and the pure automatism, starting to transpose the phantasms of the unconscious in a properly esthetic form. But what artistic products of Surrealism kept from the experiments of psychic automatism was, above all, the particular mode of producing the image, which can be actually considered the keystone of Surrealist esthetics, as Louis Aragon pointed out: “The vice called surrealism is the unsystematic and passionate use of the narcotic *image*, or rather the uncontrolled provocation of it for its own sake and for what it determines in the realm of representations of unpredictable upheavals and metamorphoses; for every image forces you every time to revise the entire universe” ([28], p. 82, my translation).

4. The surrealist image

Already in the first manifesto of Surrealism, Breton identified a special type of image, namely the *surrealist image*, for the explanation of which he appealed to the paradoxical definition that Pierre Reverdy had formulated in the magazine *Nord-Sud*, in 1919:

The image is a pure creation of the mind.

It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.

The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be the greater its emotional power and poetic reality ([2], p. 20).

To this definition, Breton would add an essential element: the lack of premeditation. Thus, for producing the image, the two distant (from the logical point of view) realities are not voluntarily juxtaposed by the subject who perceives them, but out of his will (i.e. unconsciously), and from this fortuitous juxtaposition, as a result of the “difference of potential between the two conductors”, it springs “a light of the image” whose intensity depends on the amount of that difference. Unlike the traditional poetic image, which is based on the similitude of the juxtaposed terms, the Surrealist image juxtaposes two logically incompatible realities, dialectically denying thus their “inner dissimilarity” ([27], p. 169). Consequently, its value depends on the emotional shock it provokes to the receiver, either to the reader or to the poet himself, who on his turn is nothing but a passive spectator watching the show staged by his own imagination.

Another attribute of the Surrealist image is its concreteness, which appears like an absolute, mysterious, evidence despite the fact it comes as a result of a pure mental representation. Obviously, the material of the representation has been provided by the memory of external perception, and the image achieves a miraculous synthesis between perception and representation, two divergent psychic mechanisms par excellence. “No doubt that the image is not the concrete, but the likely awareness, the most likely awareness of the concrete”, wrote Aragon in *Le Paysan de Paris*.

Since the image represents “the mere blood of poetry”, the poetic (and visual) Surrealist discourse is almost exclusively made up of disconcerting images that reason will refuse to accept. Therefore, Surrealist art is essentially *anti-mimetic*; its only exploitable domain is, as Breton maintained, the domain of “*pure mental representation*, such as it extends beyond that of true perception”, on condition that recourse to mental representation furnishes, as Freud pointed out, “sensations related to processes unfolding in the most diverse, and even the deepest layers of the psychic mechanism” ([19], p. 273). Notorious is, otherwise, the Surrealists’ aversion towards music because it is not able to arouse sensitive representations. In other words, the aim of this art is to unify, through the image, perception and representation, that is, to make some essentially subjective psychic elements (representations) gain an objective character, while calling for something marvelous from the objective reality to become manifest:

We say that the art of imitation (of places, of scenes, of external objects) has had its day and that the artistic problem today consists of making mental representation

more and more objectively precise through the voluntary exercise of imagination and memory (it being understood that only the perception of the outside world has permitted the involuntary acquisition of the materials which mental representation is called up to use). The greatest benefit 278 Manifestoes of Surrealism that Surrealism has gotten out of this sort of operation is the fact that we have succeeded in dialectically reconciling these two terms-perception and representation-that are so violently contradictory for the adult man, and the fact that we have thrown a bridge over the abyss that separated them. Surrealist painting and construction have now permitted the organization of perceptions with an objective tendency around subjective elements. These perceptions, through their very tendency to assert themselves as objective perceptions are of such a nature as to be bewildering and revolutionary, in the sense that they urgently call for something to answer them in outer reality. It may be predicted that in large measure this something will be ([19], p. 277).

The Surrealist image settles a relation of analogy between two logically incompatible realities, after the model of Lautréamont's esthetic postulate. In Breton's opinion, this poetic analogy has something in common with the mystical analogy because, like this, "it transgresses the laws of the deduction in order to make the spirit apprehend the interdependence of two objects of thought situated on different levels, between which the logical functioning of spirit can make no connections and opposes *a priori* to the setting of any connection" ([29], p. 9, my translation); but at the same time the poetic analogy is essentially different from the mystical analogy because it denies the existence, beyond the sensitive world, of "an invisible universe which tends to manifest itself" ([29], my translation). The Surrealists were interested only in this "analogical shift", for only by it they could "accede to the motor of the world": as Breton pointed out, the "most exhilarating word" they possessed was the word "like" ([29], p. 10).

From Breton's point of view, metaphor and comparison are the only acceptable vehicles of this analogical thought, while other rhetorical figures are out of interest. Yet, unlike classical metaphor and comparison, the similar figures of Surrealist poetry no longer substitute a given referent by a logical relation of similarity or contiguity but they create their own referent which has no identifiable connection to objective reality. An image of this sort is doubtlessly fascinating because it no longer points to anything already seen or already thought but reveals something else, a marvelous unknown reality; thus, it creates sense, refusing to be a mere vehicle of a pre-existent one. At the same time, the image is characterized by dynamism since it contains a plurality of virtual senses, refusing to be closed in a single sense which would reduce it to the status of sign. It is neither a sensorial or mental simulacrum of a given reality nor a metaphor or a metonymy (which are "modes of speech"), but an "irrational clash of psychological states – words, representations, objects – a discovery that dazzles the mere subject" ([13], p. 261).

Since the Surrealist image is no longer the result of a metaphor or comparison but their inner source, it generates paradoxical emotions that trouble the subject. The psychoanalytical explanation of this state of perplexity resides in the fact that the image, while connecting two incongruous signifiers, corresponds in the unconscious of its subject to a *displacement* which the reader recognizes in his own by the fact that the image seems to signify something, yet the significance remains obscure ([10], p. 243). Consequently, the image can be interpreted differently according to the displacements produced in the unconscious of different subjects, thus remaining necessarily open to multiple possible interpretations. But exactly due to this openness,

it will reject the psychoanalytical interpretations, inevitably reductive, as the sense of the image is continuously renewed by each reader, to whom it will provoke a unique effect (and at the same time, the words that generate the images are polysemantic themselves, giving rise to multiple interpretations.) Under these circumstances, one can no longer speak of arbitrariness in the case of Surrealist image since it is nothing but the translation of a displacement from a representation to another continuously produced in the unconscious of the writer, and that would explain the transitoriness of the Surrealist images, which are born out of nowhere and immediately vanish just like smoke, giving birth to new ones, equally ephemeral ([10], p. 243).

If mutability is the principal characteristic of the Surrealist image, its corollary would be a bizarre stillness often expressed by the juxtaposed realities after the model of the so-called “convulsive beauty” and “veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial”, defined by Breton ([16], p. 26) (emblematic is, for instance, the Bretonian image of the machine “paralyzed” in water or of the locomotive abandoned for many years to the “madness” of the virgin forest). If journey and metamorphosis are the main motives of Surrealist art, the poet’s journeys almost always take place in a strange world populated with immobile objects – masks, mannequins, statues, molds, broken mechanisms, stopped clocks, etc. – the movement being thus compensated and intensified by the petrification of the movement ([30], p. 121). As a consequence, one may speak of a double character of the Surrealist image since it no longer can be reduced to a single attribute, but it functions only by the dialectical coexistence of opposite forces, according to an inner *coincidentia oppositorum* (subliminally, this is about the couple Eros/Thanatos). On the other hand, the force of the images depends on the co-presence of some contrary ones on which they are projected, like in a baroque labyrinth of distorting mirrors. Thus, one may say that the Surrealist poem occupies the same space as the Surrealist movie because both aim to transform a series of static perceptions into a fluid and unpredictable continuum of representations ([30], p. 116). For instance, the poem *Calul erotic* (Erotic Horse) by Gellu Naum begins like that:

*Beyond these hands the erotic horse.
is sleeping on the horizon.
he is as big as the horizon.
from the violaceous flesh jellyfishes imagine manes.
living manes agitating their tentacles all around.
the mane catches people and eat them.
the tentacles suck them like water.
the chests alone remain outside and run.
they are bare chests like dogs.
chests with purple marks of kisses.
chests which the big teeth of the fields bite.
and the purple marks remain on the fields.
like huge mouths without teeth.
they bite the vines that run.
with amazing speed.
the vines cut into pieces become vertical.
on their top threateningly arises the sucker ([31], p. 378, my translation)*

One may notice in these verses the complete absence of metaphors and of other poetic figures, for the poem is no longer a translation of ideas, emotions or

perceptions into the poetic code but an accurate transcription of an incontinent stream of images born in the unconscious, i. e. without premeditation. Images no longer substitute referents from the objective reality and must be perceived not as symbols of other realities but as realities in themselves. The text is entirely built by addition of images that are born fortuitously one from another, with no semantic progression, just like in a dream; hence, it must be read ad litteram, with no further attempt to interpret its images in the key symbolic or allegoric. Obviously, the favorite images are no longer enchanting, fairy-like, but rather strange and menacing; daydream turns thus into a nightmare populated with evil creatures (carnivorous plants, venomous animals, succubus, killing spirits, etc.), with humans acting like broken machines, and with animated objects which attract and destroy each other, in a perpetual dialectical play, according to the esthetic ideal of the “convulsive beauty” postulated by Breon.

As far as we know, Breton himself was strongly influenced by the gloomy fantastic of the gothic novels, by the unlimited eroticism of Sade’s writings, and especially by the paradoxical demonism of Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*, whose key question (thesis) was: “in the secret resolutions of Providence, cannot genius ally itself with cruelty?” ([32], p. 6). A deliberate cruelty was sought by the Surrealists in their art (Antonin Artaud even theorized a “theatre of cruelty”) in order to shock and awaken the audience to the real life. Actually, the effect they wanted to produce was a strong feeling of *strangeness* (in Freud’s acceptance) similar to the *Stimmung* defined by Giorgio de Chirico as a state of perplexity experienced by the one who discovers mystery, contradiction, in the core of the most common reality; it is thus about a paradoxical experience similar to that of the schizophrenics, in which the familiar is suddenly perceived as strange, and the unfamiliar becomes familiar, creating in the individual, at the same time or in turn, the feeling of *déjà vu* and *jamais vu* ([33], p. 44). Deeply impressed by De Chirico’s visions expressed in his uncanny paintings, the French Surrealists would deliberately cultivate such a mood: meditation on those paintings was one of the methods they used to reach the state of “surreality”. In other words, the schizoid sensation of living in a “vast museum of bizarreries”, as De Chirico wrote in his journal, was the mere essence of esthetic experience and the way to a “secularized transcendence”, since “there is more of enigma in the shadow of a man walking in the sun than in all the religions of the past, present and future” ([33], p. 45). From the very beginning, the Surrealist productions had the essential goal to prove the incapacity of reason to build systems able to offer coherent images of an evanescent reality, and, at the same time, to obstinately search and even provoke the manifestation of the “daily marvelous”, defined by Aragon as the eruption of contradiction (i.e. of mystery) within the real. Therefore, most of the Surrealist productions would communicate a mood similar to the schizoid *Stimmung*.

One may even say that a defining characteristic of the Surrealist style is a deliberately sought passivity ([33], p. 65). As we can see, Breton recommended in the first Surrealist manifesto, as a condition sine qua non of getting inspired, the deliberate placing of the subject in the likely most passive or receptive mood, for individual conscience must be nothing but a “modest recording machine”. The corollary of this willing passivity is an intensifying of perception in order to attain that paroxysmal mood called *Stimmung*, characterized by a penetration of the familiar up to infinitesimal details, which turn it into a new, incomprehensible reality (a good example is Duchamp’s anti-esthetic of the *readymades*). After De Chirico’s model, whose hallucinatory paintings show desert towns in twilight, the Surrealists would deliberately cultivate the motif of the absence, of the void, in order to attain the same effect:

Giacometti proposed an *Invisible Object*, while Aragon wrote *La Femme Femme française*, where the ellipses are multiplied, forcing the reader to fill in the blanks himself ([25], p. 24).

5. Surrealist genders and style

One may notice that the poetics of *Stimmung* is obvious in the great majority of Surrealist productions. Either in poetry or in narrative prose, omnipresent is the motif of solitary and aimless nocturnal journey through a deserted city, in search of the “daily marvelous”, which for the Surrealists stands for a supreme esthetic category able to express “the passionate fusion between desire and reality in a surreality where poetry and liberty are one and the same” ([13], p. 261). The protagonist is at the same time a passive wanderer and a hyper-lucid conscience who tries to grasp maximum of meaning in a reality that seems to have no meaning at all ([33], p. 65). Almost always he encounters in his wanderings a woman (or, perhaps, the Woman), who seems to be an alien creature who has definitively lost contact with social reality (Nadja, for example, is mentally deranged and will be eventually interned in an asylum), but at the same time has gained contact with other parallel worlds; she is a medium who communicates the protagonist secret messages from those worlds and initiates him in their magical mysteries. In Gellu Naum’s prose (such as the novel *Zenobia*), the hero also meets a woman with whom he passes through a series of implausible adventures that could be prolonged ad infinitum in the absence of a climax and of a necessary nexus between the narrated events (both plausibility and perfectly achieved form, as specific to classical, realistic, literature, inexorably subjugated by logic, were programmatically rejected by Breton from the first Surrealist manifesto.) Like in dreams, causality is replaced by simple consecution, so that a fact is followed by another, apparently without connection.

Just like prose, Surrealist theater was included in the general poetic activity, so that, despite the production of several dramatic plays (such as *S’ il vous plaît* and *Vous m’ oublierez* by Breton and Soupault, *Comme il fait beau* by Breton, Desnos and Péret, or *Le Trésor des jésuites* by Aragon and Breton), the theoretical writings on theater were generally eluded, except Artaud’s manifestos. Since he has noticed an inevitable crisis of the contemporary theater generated by the lack of authenticity and by the authors’ incapacity to express themselves, Artaud wants the new theater to provoke itself a profound crisis, that is a crisis of conscience, hence its comparison with the plague:

The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification. Similarly the theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction. It invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it ([34], pp. 9, 12).

Therefore, the essential scope of the theater is to pull the spectator out of his passivity, completely confusing him and inviting him to discover a new sense of his existence, which he could never guess; the spectacle has to mean to him not an anonymous way to spend his time but a questioning of the existence itself, forcing him to be totally involved ([6], p. 152). For this, the new theater has to be built on the ruins of the “bourgeois” theater, conformist par excellence, with all this implied (naturalism, psychologism, verisimilitude, etc.), and to become a collective ceremonial in which either actors or spectators will engage their whole existence; it has to break with the present, since its purpose is not to solve psychological or moral conflicts but “to relate the extraordinary”, to stage “natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces”, generating states of trance similar to the dervishes’ dances ([35], pp. 68–71).

Since theater is no longer a particular mode of expression but *the mode* of expression of existence, it has to become a total spectacle which would incorporate all modes of expression: voice (with all inflections), word, gesture, mimicry, pantomime, dance, etc. ([34], p. 91). At the same time, the dramatic language has to appeal to other “non-theatrical” languages (films, collages, newspaper articles, etc.), thus transgressing the limits of art and of speech in order to realize actively “a kind of total creation in which man must reassume his place between dream and events” ([34], p. 93). Instead, this language will not use common dramatic techniques, rejecting all traditional conventions (coherence of dialogs, psychological unity of characters, verisimilitude and unity of plot), and, in general, the preoccupation for scenic representation: its aim will be the representation on the *scene of the imaginary* ([6], p. 153).

The focus on derision, black humor, surprise brings Surrealist theater close both to Dada farces and to the theater of the absurd. Putting into practice the techniques of psychic automatism, the Surrealist plays deliberately parody at the same time petrified modes of thought, archetypal situations or literary myths. For instance, *Insula* (The Island) by Gellu Naum is an ironical rewriting of Robinson Crusoe’s literary adventures. Yet, besides the comic adventures and puns, both coherence and plausibility of the plot are destroyed: the text is constructed by arbitrarily adding new situations and characters in the absence of the unity and logic of the plot, of the crescendo of dramatic tension or of the syntax of characters. It is clear that such a scenic discourse is built on the credo that in Surrealist theater everything is allowed.

One may draw the conclusion that Surrealism is in fact a new form of Romanticism. As the author of a *Philosophy of Surrealism* maintains, like Romanticism, Surrealism denies the idea of discrimination introduced by the classical rationalism, preferring instead of dissociative analysis the unifying synthesis: thus, the esthetic concept of “convulsive beauty” ruins the classical dichotomy form/content, while the idea of absolute passivity of the psychic automatism denies the separation between inspiration and the methodical and selective labour which, after Boileau, should follow it ([36], p. 39). Therefore, following the model of Romanticism (and of Symbolism also, as it too descends from Romanticism), Surrealism stands for an extreme anti-Classicism either by negation of the Aristotelian esthetic of mimesis, of rationality in art, by emphasizing the role of imagination, inspiration, intuition and spontaneity or by the idea that poetry represents the only way in the absolute. Aiming at total liberation of the spirit, of the imagination, Surrealism searches, like Romanticism, for new myths able to animate the will of radical transformation of the human being. In this mythology, woman is in the central place, as her myth stands at the origin of all the others, for only woman is thought to be capable of mediating between the self and the world so that the world could be eventually changed

according to the desires of the self (emblematic, for instance, is the formula “unlimited eroticisation of the proletariat” proposed by Gherasim Luca and Dolfi Trost ([37], p. 3). Like Romanticism, Surrealism stands for a subjectivism pushed to the extreme: abolition of all forms of rational constraint and proclamation of unlimited reign of the unconscious. Consequently, the predilect themes of all forms of Surrealist art would be the eros, the dream, the daily marvelous, the revolt, and the insanity, all of them circumscribed to the Romantic will of transcending all limits of the possible (*I Cover the Impossible* is the title of a book published by Gherasim Luca in 1945). From Romantic literature were also taken all the obsessive motives – the nocturnal journey, the “haunted” castles, the mysterious undergrounds, the specters, the double, the sea with all its exotic and malefic flora and fauna, the fantastic metamorphoses, the angelic-demonic woman, etc. – which now become obscure emanations of the unconscious repressed by the Superego, for: “To the repressing concepts God – spirituality – conscience are opposed Devil – sensuality – unconscious. Obviously, it is a clash of symbols whose stake is of mythical order” ([6], p. 25, my translation).

Like Symbolism, Surrealism was born as a reaction against “the non-spirituality” of the industrial epoch and against the bourgeois mercantilism. Deliberately searching for mystery, equivocal, openness to multiple signifying perspectives, Symbolism had preferred the field of the mythological semi-conscious, yet attaining also the domain of dream and unconscious, which was to be explored by Surrealism (Odilon Redon had already maintained that: “In art nothing happens only by the will but by the obedient listening to the unconscious that opens beyond it”). ([38], p. 6). Meanwhile, Symbolism was born as a negation of the Parnassian formula “Art for the Art”, and of the Naturalist positivism, postulating the free exercise of imagination in order to decipher the mysteries of the visible and invisible. The Surrealists, on their turn, tried to do the same: hostile to any form of specialized discourse, they implicitly denied also the esthetic ideal of *Art for the Art*, that is of an art isolated from life, definitely locked in its immutable, artificial forms. Surrealist art is neither gratuitous nor ingenuous, but incessantly provokes the receiver, maintaining him in a permanent alertness of the spirit.

6. Conclusion

As early as 1934, André Breton noticed that Surrealism, although initially preoccupied exclusively with the problem of language (i. e. automatic writing), “spread like wildfire, on pursuing its course, not only in art but in life”; it managed to provoke “new states of consciousness”, modifying thus the sensibility and taking “a decisive step towards the unification of the personality, which it found threatened by an ever more profound dissociation” ([4], cit. loc.). This means that Surrealist experiments, which otherwise changed and diversified a lot with the passing years, were perceived not as artistic goals in themselves but as means of liberating the spirit – the ultimate goal of Surrealism, continuously reiterated over time. Surrealism cannot be reduced to “pure psychic automatism”, that is to a simple method of writing, a *technique* among others, for its fundamental aim was to find out by all means a “Novissimum Organum” able to reveal the genuine mechanism of thought in order to achieve total liberation of man. Nevertheless, Surrealist experiments with language had a deep impact on modern poetry and visual art, on which one may say they leaved an indelible mark indeed, still obvious nowadays. The esthetics of *coincidentia oppositorum* and *concordia discors*, asserted in Lautréamont’s axiom and meant to provoke an

“emotional shock”, has become a common place in modern and contemporary art, while the confusion between dream and reality, memory and present life is now a common technique used in theater and cinematography. Moreover, the persistence nowadays of Surrealism in various forms all over the world proves that these means have not been exhausted yet.

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Fragment as Technique: The History of the Literary Fragment

Lilach Naishtat

Abstract

This article examines the literary fragment in the context of twentieth-century literary theories of reading and suggest a new understanding of it as a literary device rather than a historical phenomenon belonging to a given genre or period. Focusing on the concept of the fragment as it appears in various twentieth century literary theories, I show that the fragment is in fact a common device, a technique used in multiple ways across diverse literary genres. I argue that it is reflective not only of the process of its creation but also of its reception. Furthermore, although scholarship of the fragment has tended to be considered mainly within the framework of Romantic, modernism, post-modernism, and trauma studies, this article will show that when examined, instead, in accordance with modern and postmodern reading theories, the literary fragment emerges as a central phenomenon that recurs in reading and interpreting all types of texts.

Keywords: fragment, literary theories, literary device, reading process, romanticism

1. Introduction

The challenge inherent in attempting to define the Fragment is symptomatic of the phenomenon as well as of scholarly discourse on the topic. A fragment, by which, for the sake of providing a basic definition, I mean a part broken off or detached, appears in all forms of literature including poetry, prose, philosophy, and testimony, and relates to mimetic, genetic, esthetic, ideological, and generic products. Despite its ubiquity, particularly in Romanticism, up until the mid-1960s the fragment received little to no scholarly attention. Since then, interest in the topic has continued to grow, particularly over the past four decades. So various and expansive, however, has been the uses of the term and its application, that it has become almost meaningless. That being said, what is common to all these uses is a perception of the fragment as a random phenomenon best understood in light of the vagaries of its production. In contrast to this approach, the claim of the present study is that the literary fragment is, in fact, a deliberate poetic device.

The perception of the fragment as ‘non-literary’ is refuted by exploring the circumstances of its creation, as indicated in a recent volume of *Word & Image* [1] dedicated to the visual and textual manifestations of the nineteenth century French fragment. The editors, however, go beyond the romantic fragment in order “to offer a more complete description of modern fragmentation as well as an assessment

of the continuing validity of this trope” ([1], p. 1). Other scholars have recently raised proximate arguments. Rolka [2] reconstructs the concept of Romantic irony in Friedrich Schlegel’s fragmentary novel *Lucinde* (1799); Jovanovic [3] employs Formalist theory with regards to the fragment in relation to the genre of short fiction narrative; and Guignery and Drag [4] historicize and theorize fragmentation in contemporary British and American works, with Drag [5] also examining the revival of interest, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in novels that follow a fragmentary pattern. The view that is formed by these authors, and promoted here, sees the fragment not as a random disruption resulting from the circumstances surrounding its production, but rather as a literary device in its own right. My own research, described below, focuses on the contribution of twentieth-century literary theories to an understanding of the fragment as including not only the standpoint of the author (i.e., whether the fragment is happenstance or deliberate) but also that of the reader (asking when a text is read as a fragment, as well as why and by whom). From this perspective, fragmentation is not viewed as associated with a particular kind and periodization of text; instead, it is a constant fixture in reading and interpreting all texts whatsoever. To demonstrate this, I critically examine the fragment as it has been treated in a broad range of literary theories. I first address the fragment’s inherent complexities, then briefly present the history of fragment scholarship, and, finally, review the fragment through the prism of twentieth-century theories of reading in order to uncover its role as a literary device.

2. The fragment: An overview

The word ‘fragment,’ from the Latin verb *frangere* (to break), is defined as a violent disruption evidenced by fractured borderlines ([6], p. vi, 137). Although similar to ‘segment,’ from the Latin verb *secare* (to cut), they are distinguished from each other by the nature of the discontinuity. Meaning, the borders of a segment are drawn with regularity, allowing a whole to be cut apart and reassembled, like a jigsaw puzzle. In contrast, once a whole is reduced to fragments it cannot be produced again in its original form.

In the literary context, examples of fragments can be found within a wide range of genres, including poetry, prose, drama, and non-fiction. A literary work defined as a fragment is sometimes an unfinished poem, and sometimes a complete poem that has subsequently been lost, and of which only sections have survived. There are fragments in short genres (aphorism, wit, *pensée*, maxim, reflection, anecdote, and so on) as well as long ones (epic, long poem, novella, novel, and vast series, *inter alia*). Fragments have been invoked in different ways in different eras. Many works from antiquity, orally mediated down the generations, are considered fragments (e.g., Confucius’s *The Analects*, *Aesop’s Fables*, the writings of Heraclitus, the Book of Proverbs, Hippocrates’ aphorisms, Aurelius’ *Meditations*, the Talmud, and the Quran). They are an integral part of the incomplete (*inacheve*) and the unfinished (*non-finito*) – key concepts in the neo-Platonic esthetics embodied in Renaissance art. The Baroque is also associated with fragmentation. The term *baroque* in fact originates from the Portuguese word *baroco*, a broken pearl, which early eighteenth-century art scholars used to denote imperfection. So important was the concept of fragmentation to the ideals of the Baroque that Walter Benjamin ([7], p. 66) perceived it to be an inherent characteristic of this period. Classic art, he says, rejected limitedness and imperfection, whereas the Baroque is particularly interested in the significant

fragmentation lurking beneath its notorious grandeur. The fragment was used to attack the system of the Enlightenment ([8], p. 389) and evolved as an innovative Romantic genre in the late eighteenth century.

Eighteenth-century European readers were familiar with fragments in a variety of genres. They appeared in:

1. Collections of ancient texts translated and arranged by an editor. Examples are lyrical fragments translated from Greek and Roman classics and aggregated in collections, anthologies, and monographs such as *Palatine Anthology*, *Greek Anthology*, and *Miscellanea*.
2. Collections of heavily redacted narrative selections of ancient English and Scottish poetry, such as the collection of ballads edited by Thomas Percy (1765). This category also includes pseudo-fragments from ancient English poetry, such as those redacted by James Macpherson (1760–1763) and Thomas Chatterton (1777–1778). The nature of these texts, which for years were considered forgeries, is not unequivocal. They are, in a way, on the border between forgery and adaptation, and between imitation and independent creation [9].
3. Collections of short non-fiction fragments that are not integrated into a consistent plotline, for example, epigrams or aphorisms by Johan Georg.
4. Witty fragments (maxims, *pensée*, reflections) in the works of Nietzsche, Goethe, Sebastian Roche, Nicolas Chamfort, Blaise Pascal, Francois de la Rochefoucauld, and others. This category also includes works, such as by Johan Gottfried Herder, Johan Casper Lavater, and others, that consist of sketches and notes comprised of short sections whose lack of a cohesive plotline has led them to often be considered fragments.
5. Fragments found in the archives of authors. They are prevalent in a variety of documentary genres such as epitaph, epistle, marginalia, and annotation, as in Samuel Johnson's notes on several excerpts from Edmund Smith posthumous works ([1–22], p. II).
6. A wide-ranging fragmentary novel comprised of a sequence of stories (in prose or poetry) without an ending. This form deviates from the chronologically complete framework and favors an open format that embodies infinity. Examples are Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1476), Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590), Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615), Lawrence Stern's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Denis Diderot's *Jacque the Fatalist* (1796), Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), and Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* (1799) [12, 23, 24].

Fragmentary writing reached its peak, both artistically and theoretically, in twentieth-century Western culture. Extensive works from the first decades of that century, constructed as collages, are considered modernist fragments. Significant examples of modern poetic fragments are T. S. Eliot's *Wilderness* (1922) and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1922–1968). Famous fragments in twentieth-century prose include James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Benjamin's unfinished *Passages* (1927–1940), Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* (1914–1935) and fragments of Kafka's unpublished works (1915–1924) [13, 14]. Following Schlegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Benjamin, Baudelaire,

Kafka, Adorno, and Agamben, in the last decades of the twentieth century fragmentary writing spread from the literary realm to historical and philosophical writings, such as those by Jacques Derrida [15], Roland Barthes [16], and Maurice Blanchot [3]. The modernist fragment reflexively represents its own creation ([17], p. 133) as the product of an era in which the world can be grasped only as fragmentary [18].

An examination of the OED is instructive in this context, in providing the evolution of the term. Although, in the mid-eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson quoted John Donne as calling the adjective *fragmentary* “an inelegant word that is out of use,” from 1835 on, it gained increasing recognition in public discourse, largely as a result of the influence of Romanticism, and even spawning neologisms such as *fragmentize* and *fragmentitious*. Since the 1990s, the term *fragment* has been overused for its derivatives. Evolving into a fashionable buzz word that grew beyond its original meanings, it has been invoked to describe political perspectives, policies, demographic problems, and ideological, artistic, and social standpoints.

Thus, the concept of the fragment has expanded and changed significantly over the past 200 years. I suggest that it comprises four different levels of meaning:

1. *The genetic level.* Here the meaning of the fragment is determined by the ways it is formed. This includes uncompleted works as well as works damaged after they were finished, leaving only a remnant or a memory.
2. *The ontological-content level.* Here, the fragment represents elements, themes, and aspects of breakdown, destruction, fragmentation, and yearning for an absent whole that materialized solely in ruins, disasters, fragments of sculptures, childhood memories, dreams, and so on.
3. *The esthetic-ideological level.* Here, the fragment embodies a perception of the universe as an absolute and infinite unity and subverts the boundaries within its inner domains. This view thus assumes that parts of the world are not wholes but fragments.
4. *The generic level.* Texts at this level are explicitly or implicitly defined as fragmentary by genre. The subgenres of the fragmentary include aphorisms, dream-vision poems, long poems, and so on. A wider perception considers the fragment a supergenre encompassing every work that demonstrates compositional fragmentation, multiple meanings, and ambivalence.

My examination of the fragment as a literary device focuses on the generic level, which, I maintain, enables one to see the fragment as a ‘world literary genre’ or a meta-genre [19, 23].

3. Fragment scholarship

There is no consistent and reliable definition of a fragment, and relatively little interest in theorizing one [5, 25]. The difficulty in defining a fragment characterizes not only the phenomenon but also its research. Even a basic review of its various definitions reveals the circularity, ambiguity, and paradox of both the fragment and its scholarship. Consider the following, non-exhaustive, survey of academic treatments of the fragment over the last several decades: Marjorie Levinson argues that

the fragment cannot be simplified, defined, or extracted in a single reading, even by its author. She considers it an explicitly or inherently unfinished poem published during the poet's life or near his/her death [11, 14]. Philip Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy [20, 26] construe the fragment as a deliberate statement characterized by incompleteness and absent communication among its parts, on the one hand, and by versatility and a new sort of perfection, on the other. Elizabeth Harries [21, 27] defines the fragment as a synecdoche in which the reader expands the form. For Monika Greenleaf [12, 14], the fragment problematizes the appearance, production, and reception of works of art. The fundamental characteristic of the fragment, Haynes Horne contends ([22], p. 290), is its incompleteness. According to Anne Janowitz ([13], p. 444), the fragment, unlike a ruin, is a temporal or spatial part of a whole that lends itself to new poetic meanings while implying a larger whole. Sophie Thomas ([23], p. 92) notes that the fragment presupposes a whole, yet subverts it; in other words, it oscillates between the whole and the part while being more than a part and less than a whole. Paul Hamilton [24] characterizes the fragment as a failure to disclose an appealing but impossible wholeness. Michael Bradshaw ([28], p. 75) regards fragments as accidental yet self-recognized poems, deliberate manifestations of esthetic form. Andrew Allport ([29], p. 471) defines the fragment through its symbiotic affinity with other texts and its performative appearance, whereas Jovanovic ([3], p. 138) sees it as a space of tension that opens possibilities of reading that trigger the reader's interpretation, and William Tronzo [30] considers the fragment to be an object as well as a work in progress, a process of becoming.

The main controversy among scholars of the fragment stems from the debate around its origin, centering on whether it is the result of random circumstances or careful planning. The fragment is perceived, on the one hand, as a product of uncontrollable historical and psychological constraints and, on the other hand, as a result of ideological or poetic reasoning. While it is, of course, possible for a text to be both a product of constraints and a result of ideological reasoning, the question of dominance remains. For example, in the case of a poem that is unfinished due to the poet's unexpected death, such as Shelley's "The Triumph of Life" (1824), constraint is more perceptible than any ideological intentions that may have guided Shelley in relation to other fragments he produced. The tension between the perception of the fragment as an occasional product and its perception as the fruit of conscious intention lies in its very definition.

This tension encourages readers to wonder about the relation between exuberant eruptive spontaneity and strictly designed device. The unease between these tropes, in Wordsworth's significant distinction, is the space in which poetry is created [31].

Despite its centrality in Romanticism, both in theory and in practice, the fragment received hardly any scholarly attention until the mid-1960s. This neglect is clearly demonstrated by the complete absence of the fragment in the index of comprehensive studies of literature, such as M. H. Abrams' classic text *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Literary Tradition* [32].

In the first half of the twentieth century two bodies of research focused on the Romantic fragment. The first was dominant at the turn of the century and included work by English and American scholars such as Helmholtz-Phelan [33] Bradley [34], and Lovejoy [35]; the second followed in the 1940s and 1950s, led by German scholars, including Gugler [36], Eichner [37], and Behler [38]. Almost none of these scholars, however, referred in their research to other contemporaneous scholarship.

Hence, these opuses were merely hints and potentialities in the field of fragment research.

Beginning in the 1960s, an academic interest in the Romantic fragment began to develop, centered on the long poem in English Romanticism. As the decade wore on, this broadened, certainly within Anglo-American scholarship, to encompass fragmentary texts in other forms of poetry as well. There was still only minimal attentiveness to the fragmentary in prose [12, 39–41].

In the following decade, evolving out of the structuralist and post-structuralist schools of the time, several French deconstructivists developed an interest in the fragment, and intensively analyzed early German Romantic fragments, particularly in Schlegel's poetry [42–44].

Among the scholars who focus on the ideological dimensions of fragments, the most significant are Philip Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. In their groundbreaking book *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* [20], the fragment is defined in terms of three formal and thematic attributes: imperfection and lack of sequential development; diversity and intermixed types; and a unity that paradoxically emerges through the intersection of its components [20, 43].

Fragment research reached its peak in the early 1980s, with no fewer than five major studies in 1981 alone [27, 45–48]. Interest continued to evolve and branch out. Numerous later studies consider fragments in relation to specific works or specific authors [12, 49, 50]; and others. Others take a comparative periodic or inter-periodic approach [11, 21, 26, 47]; and others. Some focusing on particular aspects of the phenomenon [14, 20, 28]; and others.

There are two main approaches in the body of research delineated above: a historical approach, which focuses mainly on the Romantic fragment and emphasizes the cultural and historical conditions under which the poem being investigated was created; and a theoretical approach, which suggests principles of integration in literary texts with a special emphasis on the role of the reader. Below I introduce the most prominent scholars in each of these approaches.

The premise of the historical approach rests on a recognition of the fragment as an innovative genre in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, particularly in Germany and England [13, 45, 51–56]. Scholars who support this approach deal with the problem of multiple types of Romantic fragments by exploring criteria for the evaluation of their objects of inquiry, asking, for example, to what extent does the imperfection of the fragment reflect ideological, poetic, historical, or psychological constraints. Is the fragmentary condition of a text stated explicitly or implicitly? In what ways is the statement made? How much validity should one attribute to a retrospective statement made by someone other than the author?

Thus, the main argument of Edward Bostetter ([51], p. 83), who identified a large group of unfinished long poems by English Romantics, is that the fragment represents the failure of Romanticism and is evidence of its ideological limitations. D. F. Rauber ([52], p. 212) sees the fragment as a distinct literary type that embodies the ideals and aspirations of Romanticism. Thomas McFarland [45] explores the contrast between the Romantic ideal of organic unity and various literary and biographical phenomena. He treats fragmentation as an abstract semantic value rather than a specific and defined set of works. Glorifying fragmentation as a central value in Romanticism and the representation of emotionality, he relates to authors' biographical details, such as early death, weak personality, and tragic circumstances and destinies. Ballachandra Rajan [53] examining Romantic poems as well as those from the Renaissance and modernism, posits that unfinished long poems are a common pattern among English

poets. Anne Janowitz [13, 54, 55] examines fragment poems as a genre in relation to Romantic and modern poetics. Her comparison of these two types of poems involves concepts of completeness and closure in inter-periodic distinctions. Janowitz invokes Coleridge's triple 1816 collection of fragments – "Christabel," "Kubla Khan," and "The Pains of Sleep" – to distinguish between traits within the fragment genre. John Thompson, examining the literary and non-literary forces that shape the fragment as a central phenomenon in Romanticism, concentrates on the issue of representation in important fragmentary poems in English Romanticism in relation to psychological-empirical, artistic, and contemporary social discourses.

The historical approach perceives the fragment as a random accident that reflects the compositional, thematic, ideological, genetic, and psychological traits of its author. These definitions are either circular in nature or so broad as to comprise multiple layers up to the point of insignificance. Such perspectives explicitly and implicitly accept the author's point of view and consider fragmentation an accident or a sort of involuntary malfunction.

In this view the fragment is perceived as a random phenomenon that can be justified mainly through the circumstances of its formation. Even eminent scholars do not distinguish, *de facto*, between the layers of a fragment and its ideological, historical, and poetic dimensions. Many scholars who favor the historical approach focus on the formation of the text and reinforce Abrams' significant 1950s argument that the meaning of a poem is built on identification of the poet's intentions, impulses, impressions, and passions.

The most comprehensive study on the fragment poem in English Romanticism is that of Marjorie Levinson [11], who mediates between the historical and the theoretical approaches. Characterizing the historical and ideological dimensions of a series of Romantic fragment poems, Levinson claims that the Romantic fragment poem is a literary form derived from a corpus created under certain historical conditions including authorship, audience conventions, and reception. Unlike fragment scholars who invoke the historical approach but focus solely on the author, Levinson is also interested in the reader's point of view. Employing tools from cultural studies, neo-historicism, and psychoanalysis, she examines the ways in which a particular text creates its audience. Levinson identifies the role of the fragment as a generator of social rebellion and suggests that poets use the fragment to subvert society's constraining expectations. The poetic tensions within the fragment, she says, reflect the contested powers operating within the historical context of the creation of the fragment. The same is said regarding the tension between reader expectations and an author's choices. In her approach Levinson thus concentrates on both the formation of the texts, as well as on reading tactics ([7, 11, 26, 51], pp. 203–209, 220).

The theoretical approach takes Levinson's strategy several steps further. Scholars who subscribe to it no longer read the Romantic fragment through the eyes of its author but rather through that of its readers, in order to present it as a deliberate device [14, 25, 26, 50, 57–61].

William Wimsatt [57] focuses on imitation, a device that comprises faking, citation, and borrowing in eighteenth-century neoclassical texts. Although he does not discuss the fragment directly, he refers to a series of typical phenomena that seem to connote it, such as irony and paradox. Notably, he is the first to discuss literary devices associated with the fragment. Reuven Tsur [50] suggests that Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" be read in accordance with cognitive theories. Focusing on the connection between the structure of the poem and its effects, he illuminates the

cognitive strategies that motivate scholars who analyze this fragment. Julian Wolfreys ([59], p. 63) typifies the fragment through a unique process of reading, emphasizing the unreadability of the fragment through or beyond its content.

Alexander Regier ([61], p. 25) perceives the fragment as a reading process that reconstitutes an absent whole. The complexity of the fragment, he notes, stimulates the reader's attention to every textual or phenomenological passage and its inter-relations with a larger structure. Fulford [25] reads Coleridge's fragmented volume in the context of the material that was left out and not published. Andrew Allport [29] resists typifying the fragment in light of its form, which, he maintains, is multifaceted and defies definition *per se*. He further views the fragment as a performance conducted in affinity with other fragments, while emphasizing its recycled nature. In contrast to Levinson, who perceives the reader's activity vis-à-vis the fragment as the filling in of gaps, Allport contends that the fragment poem marks an unstable psychological-emotional content that emphasizes imitation and the distance from the original text. By shifting the focus from the writer to the reader and by invoking distinct and systematic research methods, the main contribution of this theoretical approach is to the characterization of the fragment.

Tilottama Rajan's groundbreaking book *The Supplement of Reading* [14] focuses on the significant role of the reader in developing his or her own meaning of the text. Relying on Paul de Man, Rajan deconstructs the Romantic text and uncovers the insidencies that it forces upon its readers, pointing out the tension between, for example, theories of organic unity in Romanticism and its practice of fragmentation [14, 61]. In the same spirit, Lilach Lachman [26, 62, 63], highlights the practice of reading the long fragment poem and is less concerned about the circumstances of its formation.¹

The difficulty in defining the fragment is substantial. Is the fragment a previously complete text or one meant to be complete in the future? Was its incomplete form accidentally or purposely achieved? Was it a result of a traumatic event (destruction, catastrophe, death) or merely a literary device that dramatizes such an event? Is it a single text or an assemblage of several texts? What constitutes a fragment? Is a fragment identified by its title or by the absence of a complete framework? Is it about infinity or about multiple meanings? Is it a genre in its own right or the consequence of readers' expectations? And what happens when such expectations become more flexible? Does the fragment have additional meaning in the post-modernist age of inflated fragmentation? These crucial questions are ones which, in the 100 years that have passed since the rise of the formalism that predicates modern literary theory, have yet to be posed. In seeking to address them here, I approach the notion of fragmentation from a new perspective, viewing the fragment as a distinct poetic phenomenon that intensifies the principles of integration a reader uses in decoding texts. These are aspects of reading that are inactive in relation to a conventional text but become essential in the reading of a fragment. This study further highlights the relevance of reading theories with regards to understanding the fragment as a literary device.

¹ I find Lachman's research to be an exemplary convergence of the historical and theoretical approaches. Lachman examines the process of reading Romantic and modern fragment poems by following axes of time and space. The fragment, she asserts, functions as an intersection between Romantic poetics and a uniquely demanding and dramatic reading process. In her most recent study, Lachman goes even further and contextualizes the drama of reading within a tension between the world of the poem and the active reader.

4. The fragment and literary theories

Many twentieth-century literary theoreticians chose fragmentary texts to demonstrate their teachings. Victor Shklovskii [64] focused on Stern's *Tristram Shandy* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; Tomashevsky [65] selected Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*; György Lukács opted for Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, as well as the work of Marcel Proust, Lawrence Stern, and James Joyce. Beardsley [66] used Romantic fragmentary poems by Wordsworth, Byron, and Coleridge; Barbara Herrnstein-Smith [67] focused on Romantic and modern poems; Perry and Sternberg [68] on a segment of biblical narrative; Roland Barthes [16] referenced Balzac's *Sarazine*; Wolfgang Iser [69] used Henry James' *The Figure in the Carpet*; Umberto Eco [70] chose James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* as his examples; Jonathan Culler [71]) used segments of journalist writing, Stanley Fish [72] invoked arbitrary texts written on the classroom board, and so on and so forth.

What can we learn from these choices? First and foremost, that trauma, the absurd, and dissolution—central features in twentieth-century worldviews—found expression in the fragment. The literary theoreticians identified the complexity of reception as central to the 'literary-ness' of a text, and chose fragmentary works to illustrate this concept. The choice of abstruse, strange, and incomprehensible texts stressed the need for experts to decode literature.

How did the theoreticians perceive fragmentation? Shklovskii, in his formalist manifesto "Art as Device" [64], refers to fragmentation as a manipulation of language that cumulatively produces a work of art. Fragmentation is second to the primary device, 'estranging,' a mechanism that arouses the reader's sensitivity to familiar things by decontextualizing them, thus fulfilling the main purpose of art. To Shklovskii, the fragmentation, incomprehensibility, disconnection, and digressions that shatter the chronological sequence of the text, stimulate alienation ([64], 13–15). Shklovskii demonstrates his reading theory by referencing fragmentary texts that he considers particularly artistic. He suggests that the difficulties posed by these texts are not useless defaults but intentional devices that in fact embody the very purpose of the artwork ([64], pp. 26–27).

In the same spirit, the formalist Boris Tomashevsky [65] considers fragmentation an essential feature of the literary text. Almost every literary work, he contends, is characterized by some level of fragmentation that enriches it. Although Tomashevsky views fragmentation as an innate feature of the literary, he is ambivalent about its nature, insisting, rather, that a literary work is unified by its theme ([65], p. 64).

György Lukács represents a different ideological standpoint. Lukács, in his *Soul and Form* [73], regards fragmentation as both a poetic and an ideological failure. Lukács prefers complete and unified texts, such as the nineteenth-century realist novel, over fragmentary modernist texts. He characterizes the works of Proust, Stern, and Joyce as formless, borderless, and frameless, suffering from excessive material and endless plotlines, thus embodying the complete disintegration of all contents and forms ([73], p. 14).²

² In this respect, Lukács follows Karl Marx, who suggests that fragmentation is an instrument that enables the reader to detect symptoms in the text and explain its distortions and gaps. Marx therefore chose to write in the fragment form, where he presents a future scenario today evangelized as a statement of unfolding fact [74, 75].

Louis Althusser, in his *On Ideology* (based on *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*, 1970), suggests fragmentation constitutes a disadvantage that carries a concomitant advantage, a poetic failure that stimulates the development of ideological consciousness. Althusser suggests that the literary text—like the subject and the society—is decentered and thus fails to show the connections between the diverse components of reality. Reality is only partly and incoherently represented in literary works when the author leaves some gaps unfilled. This very situation, however, allows the reader to discover signs of these repressions, whether they are marked by excessive information or conspicuously silenced discussions about certain issues.

In his *Esthetics* (1958), Monroe Beardsley negates complexity and coherency by using as an example “The Three Little Pigs,” a simple fairy tale. For Beardsley, the fragment is, by definition, an incoherent text. A consistent text, he assumes, is unambiguous, whereas the fragment, by its very nature, offers no such assurances. Beardsley seems to be aware of the tension between this unifying model and the complexity of literary work. He contends that coherence and completeness are immanent qualities of the text. These depend on the one hand, on the simplicity of substantial factors (plot structure, character motivation, and stable perspective) and, on the other hand, on reciprocity between the parts and the whole. These factors are conspicuously absent in the fragment. In fact, Beardsley does not examine texts characterized by extreme incoherence but insists that a text cannot be coherent if its elements disrupt the sequential plotline and raise expectations that are not fulfilled ([66], pp. 252–253, 401).

In her *Poetic Closure* (1968), Barbara Herrnstein-Smith finds fragmentation harmful to the quality of the work. Unlike Beardsley, Herrnstein-Smith does not perceive fragmentation as an exclusive feature of the text. Rather, she traces it to activity on the part of the reader. The connectivity of a text, she asserts, is defined through the cognitive patterns it evokes. Readers recognize closure in a poem on the basis of its structure, sequence, and setting. Fragmentation characterizes poems that fail to reach closure and hinge on the reader’s historical and poetic conditionings ([67], p. 26).

Barthes, in his book *S/Z* (1970), defines “writerly” texts as fragments that are hard to encode and that demand the reader’s active involvement to make them meaningful ([16], pp. 80–81). In the same spirit, Wolfgang Iser, in his *The Act of Reading* ([69], pp. 27–28), argues that only pulp fiction is completely consumed in the sense that its potential is totally unleashed. Iser focuses on readers who are motivated by the fragmentary text. These readers typically favor extremely subjective interpretations, whose coherence is not necessarily a product of any content hidden within text itself but is, rather, according to Iser, essentially the reader’s projection ([69], p. 16). Drag ([76], p. 61) notes that Iser’s interest in the fragment must be seen in the context of reader response to modern texts that are “often so fragmentary that one’s attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments” ([69], p. 285).

In her *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan identifies fragmentation with modern texts that resist final resolution. A literary text, she posits, negotiates between two contradictory forces: On the one hand the text provides the reader with intelligible patterns, while, on the other, it creates difficulties by invoking unfamiliar frameworks that slow the reading process. Jerome Bruner, in his *Acts of Meaning* (1986) perceives fragmentation as the outcome of the encounter between a text and a reader. The fragmentary text, in particular, stimulates the reader’s own interpretation.

At the beginning of his career, Umberto Eco [70] praised the fragment's multiple interpretations. Later [77, 78], he saw this attribute of the fragment as a significant disadvantage. Multiple interpretations, Eco now argued, are "paranoid" because they are motivated by the suspicion that words have secret meanings implied by the author.

As Eco moved from the glorification to the rejection of fragmentary works, Culler shifted towards the opposite direction, enunciating, in his *Structuralist Poetics* [71], the principles that motivate readers when constructing the meanings of a text. One of these principles is the assumed wholeness of the text. Culler considers the reader's aspiration to identify textual coherence a stimulating force and sees in unsolvable fragmentation a device that challenges this aspiration ([71], pp. 164–172). In his later work, *On Deconstruction* (1982) Culler stresses that relatively coherent texts afford the reader a broader interpretive space, in which a constraining reading method generates more fascinating interpretations ([79], p. 72). A decade later, however, in his essay "In Defense of Overinterpretation" (1992) Culler maintains instead that extreme interpretations are more fascinating than conventional ones ([80], p. 112).

Another impactful voice in this field is the Tel Aviv School, which examines both how the reader constructs meaning from the text and the text's resources for guiding or manipulating this construction ([81], p. 298). Like Herrnstein Smith [67], Perry and Sternberg [68] who represent this school, focus on the dynamics of the reading process while elaborating on the theories of Beardsley and Iser. Fragmentation appears as a symptom of trauma ([82], p. 137), and the post-structuralist Geoffrey Hartman [83] likens fragmental incidents to voices that descend into and overtake the reader's soul. Even when fragmentations are processed, and different parts of the literary text are rearranged in their original or changed context, they are like ghostly shards of the fragmented book [58]. The fragment is perceived as a manifestation of literature whose interpretation involves a substantial crisis and is often deceiving. Galili Shahar [84] explicitly associates the format of the fragment with the nature of literature per se. In this post-structuralist view, literature inherently embodies the reminiscent, the fractional, and the fragmental. Significantly, Shahar perceives literature as a way of writing about deficiency ([84], p. 91).

Does fragmentation exist in the text itself or does it derive from the reader's own attitude? The answers provided by literary theories exist along an axis, between text and reader. Unlike Romantic fragment scholarship, which focuses on the text and its author's intention, reading theories emphasize effects of the text and the reader's interpretive activity while substantiating fragmentation as a literary device. The perception of fragmentation as a feature of the text stems from the perception of the text as the main source of meaning. Scholars who primarily associate a fragmentary feature with the text itself do not ignore the reader's interpretive activity. Rather, they identify the reader's role in realizing the features of the text. Theories that consider fragmentation a feature of the text, in contrast, distinguish between levels of fragmentation: coherent and unambiguous texts vs. fragmented and multilayered texts (Beardsley), texts with strong or weak closure (Herrnstein-Smith), complete texts and surplus meanings (Shklovskiĭ), unified texts vs. disintegrative texts (Lukács), readable and writeable texts (Barthes), open texts (Eco), stable and subjective texts (Bruner), and pulp fiction vs. fine literature (Iser). The diverse theories are usually accompanied by remarks about historical significance (e.g., fragmented texts as characteristic of modernity) or evaluation (fragmentation as a negative or a positive trait).

Lukács, Beardsley, Herrnstein-Smith, and Rimmon-Kenan see fragmentation as a mannerism that undermines the artistic value of the text, implying that fragmentation is not a positive characteristic. These four scholars regard the fragment as a

formless and incoherent text that lacks strong closure and makes it difficult for the reader to formulate a solid hypothesis. Interestingly, however, when Herrnstein-Smith and Rimmon-Kenan ([85], pp. 116–117) relate to the reader's position, they regard fragmentation as an enriching element that undermines the reader's expectations ([67], p. 234) and confronts the reader with unfamiliar frameworks.

The perception of the fragmentary as a negative characteristic of the text derives from a conservative standpoint that regards coherence as a main criterion for evaluating a literary work. In contrast to the perception of fragmentation as a trait that damages the value of the text, most twentieth-century reading theories conceive of it as a trait that actually enriches the text, a shift possibly attributable to similar tendencies in observing reality at large. Marxists, structuralists, and reader-response theorists perceive fragmentation as an advantage, as do cognitive, semiotic, and deconstructive scholars. These scholars presuppose fragmentation primarily as a feature of the text, albeit one that may damage its artistic value or enrich its content. Most of them also connote fragmentation with the decoding of the text by the reader. An emphasis on the role of the reader opens up new opportunities to comprehend fragmentation more intricately, not as an attribute of the *text* but as a feature of the *reading* process. Scholars who focus on the reader's role in fragmentation distinguish between varied levels of reader competency in decoding fragments. Readers of high competency are characterized as radical (Barthes), highly motivated to formulate their subjective interpretation (Iser), identifying with the text (Bruner), and tending to "over-interpret" the text (Eco). Reader-response theories realize that readers' choices are not governed only by their personalities and are not independent phenomena. The approaches of Umberto Eco and Jonathan Culler stand out among the theories that consider fragmentation a feature of the decoding process. Like Culler, Marxist and pragmatic scholars refer to coherence as a feature of the reading process rather than a feature of the text itself.

Literary theories that center on the reading process relate to readers' eagerness to formulate a complete, closed, and coherent interpretation, as well as to their difficulties in doing so. Such theories relate to texts that are not explicitly defined as fragments and emphasize fragmentation as a characteristic of the reading process. Although the process has different names—unification, linking, integration, coherence, closure, consistency, etc.—its intention is clear: It focuses on the reader's activity and examines it in terms of creating unity. Just the same, scholars who take this approach describe it as contradictory to the coherence to which authors and readers alike aspire. While here too, some scholars see the fragmentary as a negative trait, most deem it an exuberant and enriching dimension of the text, a source of meanings, and a device that abets the dynamics of the decoding process.

5. Conclusion

Fragments evoke the wish to grasp a multilayered work. They entail humility and demand creative interpretation. The violent disruption that they cause makes them disjointed and deconstructed, riddled with multiple gaps and contradictions. Their unintelligibility, together with their alluring content, stimulate the reader's craving for comprehension. Fragments typically trigger an urgent need to establish meaning by assembling all available resources. Usually, readers become desperate when they realize that the fragment defies any possibility of definitive interpretation, and scholars also polemically negotiate the definition of the fragment.

A critical examination of the fragment in view of twentieth-century literary theories indicates that most theories do address the fragment implicitly. Formalist, Marxist, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, cognitive, and reader-response theories all perceive fragmentation as a distinct literary device that evokes reduced or multiple meanings. Most literary scholars, however, see fragmentation as a literary device, be it attributed to the text or to the reader and the decoding process. The question of whether fragmentation encourages reduced or multiple interpretations is moot. Sometimes the same scholar will, at different times, support different and clashing fragment theories. Significantly, a critical examination of the fragment through reading theories reveals that it is a literary Device, with a capital D.

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Deixis in Digital Poetry: Momentariness as Orientation in Ian Hatcher's *Attentions*

Anne Holm

Abstract

Poet and literary scholar Matti Kangaskoski has suggested that momentariness is one defining characteristic of digital cultural interfaces. In the case of digital poetry, this may, for example, involve selective engagement with a work due to a lack of clear boundaries framing its apprehension. This chapter proposes that a cognitive take on the notion of deixis can be fruitful in addressing the complexities of such momentariness. Deixis is usually understood as expressions whose meaning is relative to the discourse situation, such as “here”, and is linked to a more general perspectival positioning in cognitive accounts of language use. In a broader semiotic sense, deixis may operate through any kind of communicative cues that draw the recipient's attention to something, thus placing more emphasis on the range of mechanisms facilitating intersubjectivity. In the asynchronous discourse situations of digital poetry, analysing such cues additionally requires a medial approach. With its starting point in Ronald W. Langacker's Cognitive Grammar and drawing further insights from the spatiotemporal dimension of Lars Elleström's model of media modalities, the chapter investigates the critical potential of deictic positioning in Ian Hatcher's *Attentions* (2022). It argues that the work's treatment of the momentariness of human attention in the digital age comes into view through an intermedially informed analysis of deixis.

Keywords: digital poetry, lyric, deixis, perspective, attention, intermedial studies, cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Perspectival language reflects the human mind's embodiedness in interacting with and “negotiat[ing] the physical environment” [1] and as such offers a powerful tool for meaning-making beyond one's immediate physical reality. In analysing ideological stance as a linguistic phenomenon, Laura Filardo-Llamas, Christopher Hart and Bertie Kaal note that “perspective is not restricted to spatial point of view, but includes also points of view conceptualized in social, temporal, epistemic and deontic ‘space’ [...] provid[ing] an anchorage point in an intersubjective world-view” [1]. In linguistics (and beyond), such conceptualisations have often been investigated through *deixis*, defined as “the location and identification of persons,

objects, events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance” [2]. For example, expressions like *I*, *there*, and *tomorrow* gain their meaning from the discourse situation, anchored in the *origo* of the utterer’s subjective viewpoint [3]. Deixis’ etymological origin, linked with the semiotics of indexicality (e.g. see [4]), is in the physical act of pointing, as laid out in Karl Bühler’s seminal account of deixis in spoken discourse [5]. In asynchronous communication such as literature where pointing cannot be used for drawing attention to a given aspect of the discourse situation, additional (often linguistic) means must serve to give the necessary spatiotemporal context for conveying the utterer’s perspective. In this chapter, I investigate the idiosyncrasies of deixis in digital poetry. Although the genre is similar to “traditional” poetry with regard to the central role of verbal expression, the affordances of the digital interface may also play into the recipient’s processing of the situational context in significant ways.

In literature, ambiguity and gaps in relaying the spatiotemporal context may be meaningful for the reader’s engagement with it. For example, deictic expressions may contribute to the thematisation of difficulties with remembering, as Elena Semino shows in her analysis of Ted Hughes’s poem “Wodwo” [6]. The present chapter explores Ian Hatcher’s collection of kinetic poems entitled *Attentions* (2022), a self-reflexive exploration of human attention in the digital age [7]. The chapter suggests that perspectival positioning operates in a notably complex yet attention-grabbing manner in this work, drawing both from the tradition of visual poetry and the mechanics of internet browsing. Here I take cues from Vladimir Feshchenko and Olga Sokolova’s claim that in digital and experimental poetry deixis is an especially important marker of the discourse situation and has the potential to “provoke the reader’s active reconsideration of themselves in this world” [8]. The chapter argues that in reading *Attentions*, deictic expressions, deliberate gaps in revealing the text’s discourse situation, and the iconicity of visual and kinetic elements all add up to an experience of being challenged to contemplate about positionalities in our online existence. In this way, Hatcher provides an absorbing view into current discussions around the digitalisation of intersubjectivity.

In addition to a discussion of deixis as a linguistic and semiotic phenomenon, the chapter develops a cognitively informed take on a kinetic digital poem as an event. Already in 2006, N. Katherine Hayles posited—paraphrasing the poet William Carlos Williams—that a digital poem is “a machine that organizes time” [9]. This entails seeing a digital text as a process rather than an object, making the time of performance important to interpretation. A digital text “does not exist anywhere in the computer or in the networked system in the precise form it acquires when displayed on screen” [9]. Formulated in terms borrowed from Lars Elleström’s model of media modalities [10, 11], it may not be easy to meaningfully disentangle the *spatiotemporal modality* of a digital poem from content-level temporality as the work unfolds. By combining Elleström’s intermedial theory with a cognitive linguistic approach to perspectival language and deictic expressions, the chapter aims to show how apprehending kinetic digital poetry like *Attentions* involves the interplay of the “deep” attention typically associated with poetry and the *hyperattention* typical of digital environments [12]. For the latter, the chapter takes the concept of perspective in Cognitive Grammar as its point of departure, while the theorisation of digital poem as process gains significant additional insights from Matti Kangaskoski’s work on the affordances of digital poetry [13–15].

2. Deixis in digital environments

2.1 Perspective as anchor: Deictic expressions

According to Cognitive Grammar, perspective prominently affects how language is processed. Illustrated through the metaphor of *viewing arrangement*, perspective is manifested in language by way of different *construals*: “The same objective situation can be observed and described from any number of different vantage points, resulting in different construals which may have overt consequences” [13]. The prototypical viewing arrangement involves a spoken interaction between a speaker and a hearer sharing the same space. Elements of the interaction will subsequently gain their meaning from the specifics of the situation. For example, “I don’t see a single person” and “Nobody is here yet” exhibit different perspectives on the same scenario: the vantage point of the speaker (“I”) is more apparent in the former, while “here” and “yet” anchor the scenario in space and time in the latter. In Langacker’s model, such personal, spatial and temporal deictics relate what is being conveyed to the *ground* of the interaction; they are thus *grounding elements* [16]. Crucially, grounding elements do not merely have a grammatical function but are cognitive, or “epistemic”, in nature: they convey “notions such as reality, time, immediacy, and mental contact” [16]. Put differently, time expressions, modal verbs, spatial cues, or interpersonal references can be seen as anchors in verbally relaying—and subsequently processing—a scenario.

There are two main types of grounding: *nominal grounding* is related to (spatially) identifying objects and things out of many, while *clausal grounding* is about the temporal anchoring of events and processes [17]. While a whole host of linguistic elements may function as grounding elements, the present chapter focuses especially on tense markers in clausal grounding and time expressions such as *later*, as well as articles and demonstratives in nominal grounding. Although often not the target of conscious attention in decoding a text, a definite article conveys that there is a single instance of a particular type in the discourse situation and that this instance has either been established as a focus of attention earlier or it can be inferred without previous mention. An indefinite article, on the other hand, introduces a new element. Furthermore, demonstratives such as *this* and *that* may be used to create a similar effect to the definite article by way of anaphoric reference, but demonstratives additionally relay proximity or distance. Both are central in directing attention [17]. The spatial orientation can also be complemented with a focus on *dynamic deictics*, involving movement in space or developments in the course of time or interpersonal events [18].

In the prototypical viewing arrangement, the default set-up is one of joint attentional control, “where both interlocutors have their attention fixed on the same instance” [17]. The ground itself is backgrounded, or “offstage” [17]. Discussions of linguistic deixis often conceptualise this “here-and-now” of the discourse situation as the *deictic centre*, which in literary contexts is typically *not* physically shared by the discourse participants [19]. However, interestingly for the case of digital poetry in particular, Langacker notes that in language processing, “linguistic units invoke the ground and its various facets schematically, as **virtual** entities”, while an “**enactment** of the speech event scenario” is likewise prompted. Thus, deictic elements have semantic as well as pragmatic functions, “the latter arising through particular entities being identified with roles of the scenario whenever it is enacted” [17]. In literary applications, the guiding assumption is often that deictic clues allow readers to orient

themselves to the discourse situation at hand and align themselves perspectively with the interlocutors' positionalities via *deictic projection* [19]. With this in mind, I will conclude this section by briefly addressing some additional facets of deixis in literature (for a lengthier overview focused on poetry, see Chapter 2 in [20]).

In their seminal literary applications, Peter Stockwell and Dan McIntyre both expand deixis as a text-analytical tool beyond references to “objects, places, and people” [19, 21]. Taking Stephen Levinson’s pragmatic model as his point of departure, McIntyre distinguishes between spatial, temporal, person deixis, social deixis, and empathetic deixis [21, 22]. While a range of typical linguistic expressions realising the first three can easily be named, social deixis and empathetic deixis constitute another level of analysis in that they feature non-literal judgements of closeness or distance to people, places, and objects. In short, social deixis conveys social distance, for example, through the use (or absence) of titles and proper names, while empathetic deixis reflects psychological distance suggested by linguistic choices and intonation, for example, in uttering “*that* person” with emphasis to create a distance between the person referred to and the speaker [21]. Stockwell also discusses textual and compositional deixis, which encompass foregrounded aspects of a text in terms of its “textuality” or “texture” [19]. Self-reflexivity, signposts like headings, and notably “literary” features would fall under textual deixis, whereas compositional deixis is primarily concerned with literary conventions, for example, through generic features or iconicity [19]. Relating to the attentional focus implied in the concept of foregrounding, Stockwell additionally applies the computer science terms *push* and *pop* to *deictic shifts* in engaging with a literary text, modelled with reference to deictic shift theory. Push relates to a reader being directed to align their perspective with that of a character or narrator, while pop refers to coming “out” of a fictive deictic field adopted previously [19].

Whereas many literary applications of deixis focus on narrative texts, Barbara Dancygier’s concept of Fictive Deictic Ground offers a helpful way of thinking about gaps in a poem’s discourse situation [23]. Drawing on Langacker, among others, Dancygier posits that poetry frequently features discourse situations without a clear or only a partial deictic centre. Dancygier’s observation that direct discourse (dialogue) does not “build off of a Deictic Ground set up earlier in the text (as narrative fiction does)”, but instead evokes an incomplete Fictive Deictic Ground, can arguably be applied to ambiguity created by the use of deictics more generally as well [23]. Similarly, there is wider relevance in Dancygier’s observation that the use of specific discursive frames in Sylvia Plath’s “The Applicant” serve to “construct [...] viewpoints needed in the interpretation” [23]. While the lyric “I” typically provides a perspective to relate for the reader of lyric texts, they often also feature multiple voices by way of quoting or paraphrasing speech, other texts, or through shifts in linguistic register. In the case of digital poetry, conventions related to the interface can be added to the list, akin to linguistic register.

2.2 Deixis, imagination, and mediation: Grappling with the spatiotemporal

As has already been suggested above, deixis is not limited to linguistic referentiality. In his semiotic account, Per Aage Brandt talks about *deictic acts* with such wide-ranging examples as placing a stick in a flowerbed as a reminder of a bulb that was planted and looking at the ceiling when someone is talking as a response to what they are saying. In Brandt’s broad conceptualisation of deixis, what is important is an *indication* in the communication that the recipient’s attention should be drawn to a

particular thing. These indications may be fleeting and ambiguous, and indeed Brandt mentions that “their intelligibility or ‘felicity’ depends strongly on the presupposition of a communicative intersubjective bond, such as a shared caring for something” [4]. Another potential challenge adding to this is, as discussed earlier, the participants not sharing a space when the communication unfolds. Here, the role of memory and imagination is accentuated. As Donna E. West points out in relation to the Latin translation of deixis, *demonstratio*, “[d]emonstrations transcend spatial and temporal contiguity between the signifier and the signified” by referring to “absent physical objects and to memories brought about by mental operations” [24]. In her semiotic re-reading of Bühler’s groundlaying theory of deixis in spoken discourse, West furthermore observes that such memories prompted by mental operations may bring into view how a supposed state of affairs is assessed as either factual or imagined, as well as allowing for the construction of different points of view [5, 24]. West is here alluding to Bühler’s *deixis am phantasma*, one of three types of deixis in his model. Crucially for the apprehension of deixis in literary texts, in *deixis am phantasma*—or imagination-based deixis—a reference “is transferred *in toto* to ‘imagined space’, to the realm of the somewhere or other of pure phantasy, the realm of the here and there of memory” [5]. Such instances can be understood without online perceptual stimuli because “the speaker and hearer of a visual description of something absent possess the same talent and resources that permit the actor on the stage to make something that is absent present” [5]. Continuing with the stage metaphor, Bühler argues that memory allows the recipient to “see ‘there’ with his mind’s eye” [5] without many explicit cues. This highlights the importance of considering the cognitive aspects of deixis as an intersubjective phenomenon.

An intermedial approach allows for a more granular understanding of how such projections are cued in different media environments, both at the zoomed-in level of local semiotic resources and at the level of interface or media type. Elleström’s intermedial theory underscores how various media are both different and similar and thus fundamentally interrelated. With attention to the modalities of media, the characteristics of a given medial expression can be unpacked and put into the greater context of mediality [10]. The *material modality* is the interface through which a media product is made available (involving some kind of materiality), and this physical existence is always also spatiotemporally extended (*spatiotemporal modality*) and apprehended through the senses (*sensory modality*). Through these three modalities’ facilitation, a media product’s meaning can be interpreted with attention to the communicative resources used in the *semiotic modality* [11]. For example, a kinetic digital poem is always temporal by way of its existence (unfolding over time), but a kinetic digital poem may also bring time as an aspect of its meaning into focus, such as by way of using different temporal markers in verb phrases for grounding (cf. Section 2.1.). This may include envisaging an unfolding of events in an imagined scenario not in the “here-and-now” of the discourse situation, with referential language cueing that scenario.

In a macro-perspective, intermedial studies offers scaffolding for considering the idiosyncrasies of media types, such as digital poetry. Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher refer to this as *contextualised medium specificity*: while “a limited number of more or less stable media-specific characteristics” may be called upon in the analysis of a media product, it is important to recognise that these are prone to change over time [25]. For example, Roberto Simanowski posits in his discussion of kinetic concrete poetry that “the visual materiality of language” that characterises concrete poetry is subtly reimaged in kinetic concrete poetry. [26] Simanowski goes on to

state that intermediality is about “the change of the media-typical act of reception”, which in kinetic concrete poetry—typically for digital poetry in general—includes the dimensions of time and interaction on top of decoding language and visuals [26]. As demonstrated later in the analysis, (especially) in the case of a self-aware work like *Attentions* such layers are noteworthy for the more zoomed-in level of apprehending the discourse situation from deictic clues. It can also be added that while *Attentions* makes occasional use of the affordances of concrete (or visual) poetry, its kinetic component is marked by the current logics of the internet age, in contrast to Simanowski’s examples, which are mainly from the early 2000s.

2.3 Deixis in digital poetry: Processes and momentariness

While several definitions exist, digital poetry is usually understood as poetry created with a computer, i.e. it is based on code [27]. If the method of creation is radically different from traditional print poetry, the reception of digital poetry has unique characteristics too. Digital poems often prompt a range of *processes* in relaying their content to the reader via the interface, such as “temporal control, sequencing, layering, text animation, text generation, and a diverse set of explorative functions” [14]. Kangaskoski argues that the lack of a *codex*, prototypically the material whole of a poetry collection, means that digital poetry “often has no clear textual boundaries [...] and the text can be accessed in many ways”, including processing parts “singularly” [15]. Therefore, it is important to attend to how the reader meets a digital poem at the interface. In Kangaskoski’s analytical model, the elements that the work consists of (such as words and images) are first observed without the reader’s involvement, after which attention is turned to how the work is realised via processes [14]. Reading the code of the piece to appreciate its “movement” may also be part of this [14, 28]. Ultimately, the aim is to uncover the work’s *logic*, i.e. how it “affords some means and strategies of reading and excludes others, be it by material or conventional restrictions” [14]. From an intermedial angle, grasping the logic may also depend on the reader’s knowledge of strategies typically employed with other media types, such as when a digital poem employs game mechanics.

In a more encompassing zoomed-out perspective, a digital poem’s logic can be further scrutinised in light of its *material, processual, cognitive, and cultural affordances* [15]. Crucially, “affordances as action possibilities are enabled by the technical characteristics of the interface but they only arise in interaction, in mutuality, with the reader” [15]. This puts emphasis on qualifying the cognitive aspect especially, and here Kangaskoski brings up Hayles’s term hyperattention, “characterised by skimming, reading multiple information streams, switching between tasks rapidly, and a short attention span” [15, 12]. Of course, the hyperattention mode is contingent on cultural conventions, i.e. knowledge of how an interface works, such as scrolling in a browser [15]. While it may typically be employed in a non-conscious manner, in a literary setting the reader may be particularly aware of what is asked of them. Álvaro Seïça argues that in kinetic digital poetry “space and time present themselves, they materialize, but they also represent” and quotes an interesting statement by Hatcher on the tendency’s implications for his artistic practice: “My memory and conceptions of space and time are imprinted with the logics of digital systems” [29]. Adapting related insights from Lev Manovich, Kangaskoski lists features that characterise the logic of digital cultural interfaces, among them *momentariness* [30, 15]. It consists in “glimpses of an overall structure” and “passing moments whose meaning is formed in relation to the ephemeral reader” [15]. This connects back to the earlier point about

engaging with parts of a digital poem singularly, but also resonates with Langacker's ideas on the "virtual" evoking of the ground when attempting to apprehend reference points for deictic expressions [17].

It is worth emphasising, however, that even if hyperattention is evoked as a mode, reading digital poetry does not necessarily have a defamiliarising effect (for example, see [31]). That is, contrasting hyperattention with deep attention is not a value statement as such, unlike in some literacy debates that pit print books and digital media against each other [32]. Hayles argues for "an expanded repertoire of reading strategies", allowing for deep reading and hyperreading to "operate synergistically" as needed [12]. That is not to downplay the issue of digital distraction and its ethical reverberations (e.g. see [33]); as a prominent theme in Hatcher's *Attentions*, this is touched upon in the analysis. Still, whereas Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin's study on deixis and the reception of literary games found that deictics contributed to the potency of spatiotemporal immersion [34], the "depth" in reading digital poetry is more likely to be oriented towards intentional decoding and reflection than being "in" the scenario(s) relayed.

3. Hatcher's *Attentions*

3.1 Framing the discourse situation

According to the author's own notes on *Attentions*, the collection of kinetic poems explores mental presence in a digitalised world. While the notes conceptualise attention as both a commodity and an act of generosity in the Internet age, there is an overall suggestion that digital patterns of attention-grabbing exert control over us in a somewhat unidirectional manner: "Wherever attention points, attention creates a point. There doesn't have to be a there there for there to be a there here" [35]. Interestingly, Hatcher makes this point with a playful use of place deictics: the scenario referred to with the distal "there" may be a distraction from the proximal "here". Either way, the directing of attention has occurred—or a gesture in that direction, given the lack of specifics. In a broad perspective, the question is not just what attentional choices humans make but also how they cope with the consequences of these choices (consciously or not) when "[t]he prospect of attentional validation beckons from the digital sunset" [35]. From this angle, the analysis of imagination-based deixis has promise for unveiling worthwhile insights about switching attention between "there" and "here".

Another framing for engaging with the work is given in the label following the main title: "a digital chapbook". Chapbook is a medium with a long history, defined by its short format and often with the underlying motivation of disseminating content nimbly and cheaply; in the past, the chapbook format has been favoured by countercultural groups like the Beat poets [36]. Combining this label with the logic of digital reading environments suggests a "new nimble" in the mediation of poetry (or content more broadly), perhaps also the down-prioritisation of commercial aspirations in a network that prominently facilitates pursuing financial gain. The interface of *Attentions* visually resembles a browser within a browser, with numbered tabs that can be closed like in a real browser. As such, it calls upon the reader's schematic knowledge of internet browsing as an activity and thus connects to a larger context of mediality (cf. [10]). As regards the logic of reading [14], the numbering, increasing from left to right, evokes linearity familiar to Western readers and links readily

with the logic of a print book, such as a traditional poetry collection. The content in the tabs does not appear to change if not read in the order the numbers suggest. The poems within the tabs can be likened with print poetry visually; however, in terms of processes [14], the reader must scroll to reach the end of some of them, and there are also small animations, which the reader does not seem to have control over. Moreover, it is possible to open a new tab within the “browser”, each time uncovering a new image.

In the following sections, I will investigate the role deixis plays, in relation to the processes prompted by the interface, in setting up imaginative spaces to thematise attentional shifts. Since the kinetic elements are intermittent, linguistic analysis gains proportionally more space. Furthermore, the visual and kinetic elements are explored alongside the linguistic aspects to showcase how they interact in the semiotic modality. Due to the limited scope of the chapter, the discussion will only refer to poems 1, 2, and 5.

3.2 Capturing attention: Deixis and spatiotemporal crossings

The opening poem (if reading in a “linear” fashion) establishes the theme of monetising our online presence by way of repeated references to paying and expressions such as “interest c o m p o u n d s”. The realm of (commercial) online content and interaction is also verbally established, but perhaps more attention-grabbingly so in the text on the screen visually imitating the shape of a web camera, as shown in **Figure 1**.

Verbally, the lines “interest/compounds/in the eye/of the digital/camera” relay an action in the present, one that is grounded through the use of definite articles in relation to the web camera, without the specific camera that is active here having been

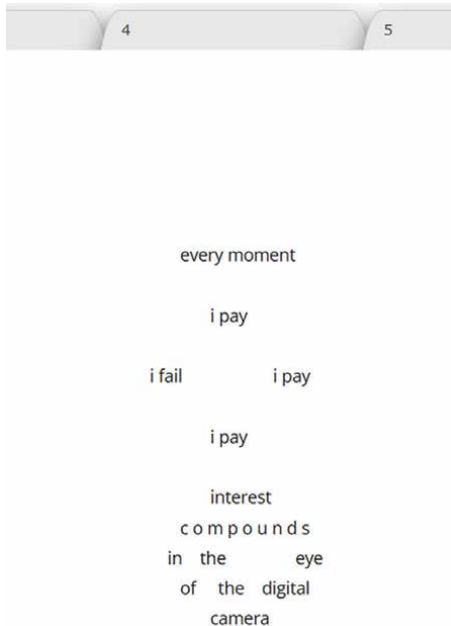


Figure 1.
Opening of the first poem of Hatcher's Attentions.

previously established as a focus of attention (cf. [17]). Instead, that focus of attention is established simultaneously with scanning the words as the visual of the camera and its eye emerges. The earlier lines “every moment // i pay” give this present-tense action a framing of repeatedness or pervasiveness, thus establishing that it is not of key importance when the situation described is unfolding or has unfolded. Moreover, the empty spaces between letters in stretching out “compounds” to fit the image amplify the durational aspect of this pervasive action. This resonates with Simanowski’s point about how concrete poetry is “visual not because it uses images, but because it adds the visual gestures of the words to their phonetic and semantic ones as a complement” [26]. Appreciating this added media-relational layer allows for a more nuanced understanding of the poem’s logic at a zoomed-in level: the attention-capturing camera eye with all that entails can be seen as “gesturing” towards the recipient too. With that in mind, the lack of emphasis on the precise temporal anchoring of the actions described appears meaningful. Similarly, the lyric “I”, while offering an origo [5] for the reader to pin the actions on, does not gain particular characteristics that would flesh them out as an agent or experiencer. Even though the poem is overall quite static (there is only one small animation later on), the iconic representation of a web camera and the present tense use of the verb *compound*, meaning to accumulate, associate (based on schematic knowledge) with streams of video captured with a camera and put online to be perpetually accessible. In this way, there is an interesting effect of crossing over imaginatively to the temporality of video (cf. [11]), even if the content of that imagined video remains unspecified.

Further into the poem, the footage capture is implied to work as memory through selection and potentially also editing: “with / hardware / acceleration // dedication of // memory : what // luxury // to decide / later / which moment // will be // definitive”. The lack of articles with the nouns suggests that “memory” is meant in a generic sense, as storage (which digital devices also possess), even if the designation “which moment” specifies that several scenes have been captured. The long gaps between the words could also be thought to imply the processing of content by a machine, which brings the spatiotemporal modality of the work in dialogue with the semiotic [11]. This idea is reinforced by the simple animation of a pinwheel turning that appears shortly after when scrolling down, as per **Figure 2**. The screenshot also shows an empty white square, which could be thought of as a frame into which the selected “definitive” moment will be placed, referred to anaphorically with “this” in the lines that follow. Thus the temporal deictic “later” is understood as a distal moment of reflection after capturing content, a gap in time that is facilitated by technology aiding human memory in “going back”. The ambiguities that make the anchoring of the poem’s content somewhat demanding could be seen as mirroring the jumping between instances in screening footage or images when trying to arrive at a decision, again reminding the recipient of the spatiotemporal mechanics (or “texture” [19]) of internet-based intersubjectivity.

Further into the poem, the lyric “I” is only implicitly at the deictic centre [19] and their attention seems to have slipped into a number of things the online world has to offer: “organ grindr / half- pipe / slides / in / half- // light / a cheshire / wrestler a // spectral / tremor”. The indefinite articles convey new one-off occurrences (cf. [17]), as if flashes on a screen when browsing the net, perhaps with several tabs open at the same time as the interface suggests. There is also a lack of specific reference in the prefix “half” not properly attaching to a noun or adjective, giving the impression of unfinished thought processes and/or videos. The fact that what is being imaginatively referred to could be either mental operations or stimuli giving rise to

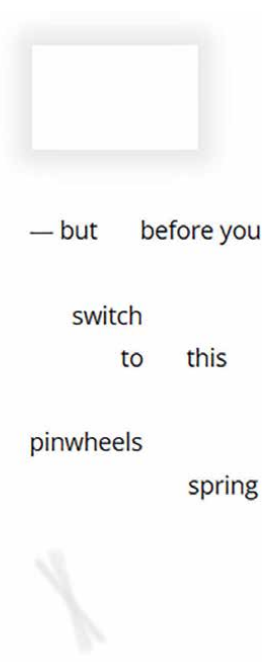


Figure 2.
Screenshot from the first poem of Hatcher's *Attentions*.

mental operations (cf. [24]) seems meaningful. Furthermore, there is a movement towards less and less cohesion, considering that the compound “a cheshire / wrestler” seems to be a mash-up of a fictional character and a sportsperson and that the last noun phrase “a // spectral / tremor” is quite abstract, capturing only the general light and movement patterns of what is likely another video or snapshot encountered in cyberspace.

This tendency accelerates in the final part of the first poem: “session_id / sing let / stack / sing let / process / background let // process test / background // process con // test / the / decision // to not / be / content // with not / being / present”. It is as if computing processes take over cognitive processes here: in addition to “session_id”, the words “process” and “background” are repeated several times, readily associating with background processes that run in digital devices. This recalls the comment by Hatcher quoted earlier about his memory and idea of time and place being “imprinted with the logics of digital systems” [29]. Hatcher unpacks this idea from a more linguistic perspective in an interview:

I think of fragmentary language as part of a dynamic range of material that evokes systemic alterity and complicity. Software can do insane things like explode and aggregate colossal amounts of data, or repeat the same action every half-second forever tirelessly. But timed repetition is also inherently musical, and people instinctively respond. There's a push-pull with repetitive broken language [37].

Towards the end of the poem, there indeed seems to be a push-pull effect with the computation-oriented language and very vague references to the content being shown through computation, possibly a music video due to the repeated references to

singing—or even an on-going recording of vocals. The discourse situation is notably more difficult to pin down than at the beginning of the poem, which can partially be attributed to the lack of grounding elements [16]: the verbs lack temporal and other markers, while “process” appears without articles or other referential elements. Additionally, the gaps between words get longer throughout these lines, as if iconically suggesting longer processing time, perhaps lagging, until the noun phrase “the / decision”. This noun phrase stands out also because of the definite article suggesting that the recipient should know which decision is being referred to from the context of the discourse (cf. [17]). It associates with the earlier part where the reviewing of captured footage was to result in selecting one “definitive” moment. This implicitly brings back the lyric “I”, allowing the reader to align themselves with what seems like a resolution to “not / be / content // with not / being / present”.

3.3 Ceasing to notice: Unstable viewing arrangements

Even if *Attentions* has a visually very approachable outline guiding the reader, the sense of momentariness [15] in engaging with the work increases in progressing past the first poem. In the second poem, the lyric “I” is recollecting a moment that has slipped past: “you just / said / something // i missed it // i think / but / it was ok to miss / i think // because this is / still it // i think / i think // but i / i am / missing it // it / again again”. The repetitions here could signify both insecurity (particularly considering the implied context of oral communication) and the iterativeness of computational processes from before, i.e. two different discourse registers (cf. [23]). The lyric “I’s” perspective is emphasised through the pervasiveness of the pronoun “I”, but the internal contradictions in what the lyric “I” is stating arguably cause the reader to rather distance themselves from them than to orient themselves with them perspectively (cf. [19]). Crucially, the moment that passed, encapsulated in the deictic pronoun “it”, is not imaginatively retrieved as in Bühler’s *deixis am phantasma* [5]. The content of the utterance initially referred to with “it” is first dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant (“it was ok to miss”) and then conflated with something else (“this is / still it”), likely what the other interlocutor is on-goingly saying. Thus, the lyric “I’s” mental operations are trying to catch up despite lagging behind, reflected also iconically between the long gap between “still” and “it”. As one might expect based on schematic knowledge of video calls and related media types, this catching up is fruitless: “I am / missing it // it / again again”. The last two repetitions appear as echoes, suggesting a lag in the connection that is facilitating the conversation or other technical issues. As a result, it is clear that the discourse participants’ viewing arrangements are not aligned towards the same object of joint attention, as in Langacker’s theorisation of perspective discussed in Section 2.1 [17]. Whatever the “it” was, the echoes and the *ing*-form of *miss* highlight the lyric “I’s” subjective experience of it as irretrievable.

Although there are also moments of successful communication along the way, the issues with maintaining attention get successively worse in *Attentions*. The fifth poem features animation that imposes a process of waiting a short while to read each line as the words rotate around a horizontal axis (cf. [14]). The challenge to reading is illustrated in **Figure 3**.

Of course, the movement of the words brings the reader’s efforts to hold their attention on what is being displayed to the fore. This time, the kinetic element plays a role in how the lines can be read to form meaningful wholes, diverging from the previously employed rather traditional lineation: the rotation together with longer gaps

what good is
 the
 collective other
 what good is
 context
 top 10 microwave
 hacks amazing
 trivia you
 without
 can't live
 without
 without
 looking poles with
 a fork
 what good is

Figure 3.
 Screenshot from the fifth poem of Hatcher's *Attentions*.

between words suggests which words form “chunks”, sometimes aligning with the left-to-right direction of reading individual lines and at other times marking a word underneath another as belonging to the same unit. For example, in **Figure 3** showing the opening of the poem, the first five lines appear cohesive read in the conventional way, “what good is / the / collective other / what good is / context”, whereas “top 10”, “trivia”, and “hacks” underneath each other seem to form a whole. On the other hand, what constitutes a “chunk” is quickly questioned as the reader progressively engages with the poem’s processes. On the right-hand side, “microwave”, “amazing”, “you”, “without”, and “cannot live” are underneath one another, followed by “without” repeated twice. These words could belong to the same discourse situation—the succession sounds like several advertisements jumbled up—but the presentation with its lack of grounding elements does not encourage trying to piece these discourses together in a more pinned-down manner. As such, the Fictive Deictic Ground that is alluded to remains at the level of register—recognising generic advertising “lingo”, much like in Dancygier’s analysis of Plath’s “The Applicant” [21]. Indeed, the earlier lines “what good is / context” appear to encapsulate this: it is as if the poem is thematising the delicate nature of the shared caring for something that facilitates deictic acts being noticed as such, as discussed by Brandt [4].

Another self-reflexive aspect of the fifth poem is its overt focus on time at the level of verbalisation whilst simultaneously requiring the recipient to take time processing lines in proximity to each other to form meaningful wholes. In Elleström’s terms, the work’s spatiotemporal modality seeps into the semiotic [11]. The phrase “spending time” is first sporadically repeated, but towards the end becomes what could be described as a point of fixation: “spending time / in this / body / spending / time / time spending / ô / time spending / time pending / pending / time / pending / time / ending / time / ending / time / ding time / ding time [...]”. Despite the lack of coherence regarding the discourse situation, the recurring *ing*-forms contribute to the grounding here in that something is underway and finally comes to an end (“time

/ ending”). The fixed expression “spending time”, which incidentally rotates as a “chunk”, also conveys an unspecified duration, which is suggested to conclude with a “ding”—a noun with a temporal meaning in the sense of the sound onomatopoeically echoed in the word. If following the poem’s associative logic, this may connect with the earlier mention of a microwave, suggesting that perhaps the time elapsed was in wait for food (or similar) to be prepared. Indeed, the repeated “ding time” chunks also appear to rotate faster than the rest of the phrases, pointing to the subjective experience of time. Furthermore, there could be an overall iconic suggestion of time in the poem’s movement: the rotating words may associate with a perpetual roller desk calendar. Even if this connection is somewhat tenuous, *Attentions* uses iconic referentiality consistently as a resource throughout the work, starting from employing the browser format to platform the theme of human attention in the digital age. Thus, intermedial relations (cf. [10]) are essential to interpreting the logic of the piece.

Lastly, I want to briefly attend to the only outright interactive element in *Attentions*, the possibility of opening a new “tab” in the browser within a browser. Namely if guided by the successive numbering, this will be the conclusion to the work, suggested by the placement on the far right of the screen. Whereas the eight and last poem ends on a focused note with the lines “for a moment // the world / theatrical // nexus”, the “browsing” of course continues with each new tab opened. Such an emphasis on the materiality modality [11], the interface, together with the fact that the opening of a new tab could be repeated endlessly, underscores a sense of momentariness [15]: the different images appearing present glimpses from a whole. This could be conceptualised as a particularly notable *pop* [19], a deictic shift to the work’s self-reflexive realm. The images appear to be various visual renderings of the theme of attention, ranging from photographs of people taking photographs to diagrams portraying the functioning of circuitry in a memory chip. Another type of example, the fake educational webpage shown in **Figure 4**, could be seen as conveying uncertainty about what is important and the current-day impulse to outsource solving such a dilemma by turning to the internet (or AI). The material affordances of the example are highly recognisable against cultural knowledge of internet-age educational content, prompting both meta-level appreciation of the author’s attention to



Figure 4.
Image opened through the interactive function in Attentions.

detail and a feeling of verisimilitude, possibly leading to a questioning of the image's "fakeness". In sum, we indeed exist in a "nexus", whether we are aware of it in a given moment or not.

4. Conclusion

The chapter set out to illustrate the interpretive yield that a cognitive framing of deixis, a linguistic manifestation of perspective, could bring to the analysis of digital poetry. Building on the notions of grounding and viewing arrangement in Cognitive Grammar, as well as a conceptualisation of the processes of a digital poem bringing about a certain temporality to the reading, the chapter showed how articles, pronouns, demonstratives, and temporal markers contribute to piecing together a discourse situation. In the analysis of Hatcher's *Attentions*, this was frequently characterised by difficulties pinning down the discourse situation due to lacking grounding elements, ultimately showcasing how a person's existence online is permeated by the simultaneity of stimuli and resultant difficulties in focusing one's attention. The materiality [11] of the work as a browser within a browser was furthermore suggested to frame the interpretation of the discourse situation as involving various online activities. As such, the momentariness typical of engaging with digital cultural interfaces [15] was brought to the fore.

Additionally, the chapter made it evident how *Attentions* relies on iconicity and intermedial relations in commenting on how human mental operations fare in digital environments. For example, in the first poem of the collection, the visual representation of a web camera associated with capturing (and consuming) video, thus bringing the work's spatiotemporal and semiotic modalities [11] in dialogue with each other. Similarly, in the fifth poem the animations in the poem suggested the movement of a type of perpetual calendar. Indeed, the self-reflexive nature of *Attentions* meant that deixis as an analytical tool had obvious relevance: as Hatcher himself puts it in the author's notes, the work queries the patterns and ethics of pointing someone's attention to something. This brings crucial questions regarding the possibility of employing of hyperattention in a way that is not at the expense of "deep" attention (cf. [12]) into view, as well as potential disparities between people in this regard (cf. [33]). Put briefly, the consequences of the commodification of attention—a constant stream of prompts that try to sell us things—are in contradiction with the limited amount of time that any given individual is able to spend on what matters.

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The Digital Transformation of Literature: Intermediality and Poetic Experience in the Digital Artwork *Evolution* (2014)

Beate Schirrmacher

Abstract

In the twenty-first century, literature is no longer confined to printed books or written text but is mediated by digital technology in multisensory ways. These technological and sensory changes call for a fundamentally intermedial perspective on literature. This article presents intermediality as a crucial framework for unpacking the changing interplay between objects, communicative resources, and literary conventions. Specifically, Lars Elleström's intermedial framework (2021) enables a more fine-grained exploration of the digital condition of literature. Analysing Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson's digital artwork *Evolution* (2014) using Elleström's media modalities allows us to trace how technological changes transform our literary experience, compared to a printed poetry collection or AI-generated poems. Beyond interart relationships and approaches to digital literature, an intermedial perspective highlights the potential of literary language use and offers valuable insights to human-machine creativity.

Keywords: intermediality, media modalities, Johannes Heldén, generative AI, digital poetry

1. Introduction: Literature beyond the book

A Google Images search for “literature” often shows images of books, especially piles of old books. Indeed, it might be challenging to quickly convey what literature is without mentioning text, books, specific authors or genres. Moreover, in a digital media ecology, verbally expressed human experiences, which we might call “Literature,” are no longer confined to printed books written by professional authors and published by specific publishing houses. There are audiobooks and eBooks accessed *via* digital devices, fanfiction published on platforms, and graphic novels, TV shows, and video games offering multisensory narrative experiences. Narratives travel effortlessly across platforms and media types, spawning sequels and prequels, forming what Henry Jenkins called transmedia storyworlds [1].

These changes highlight a greater variety of literary modes, media, and practices than we first might think of. Beyond printed books with text-filled pages, images

and the spoken word have always played a role in experiencing literature. Stories and poems existed long before printed books, in genres other than the novel, and were not necessarily read silently. Literary history starts with adaptations, with epics meant to be performed by storytellers, who might have viewed written texts with the same scepticism that can meet audiobooks or podcasts today.

Thus, the digital transformation highlights how our current understanding of “literature” has been shaped by printing culture. As new objects, modes, and practices of accessing literary experiences emerge, our concept of the medium literature evolves as well. In the current media ecology, books with text in the form of novels still play an important role but are contested by stories in auditory, audiovisual, or interactive modes, as well as hybrid genres merging text and image, fiction and fact. Reading and writing practices change when we create digital texts that can be instantly edited and easily combined with other resources [2]. This affects even classical literary notions such as author, text, public and intellectual property [3]. Thus, literature in the twenty-first century is, as Tygstrup calls it, “literature after literature” as we used to know it – beyond nation, book, and fiction ([4], p. 166).

The transformation of literature has consequences for literary studies, which must also move beyond traditional boundaries. The use of digital tools allows for the analysis of literary texts as large data corpuses with methods of “distant reading” [5]. A closer collaboration between creative and critical exploration in forms of artistic research might be another way to address the more fleeting, quickly transforming objects of literary studies ([4], p. 168). However, to understand how literature is changing, scholars need to study the relationship between media, perception and cognition, as well as practices and conventions ([2], p. 4), and understand literature in closer interrelation with other media.

This article presents an intermedial approach to capturing the current transformation of literature. By tracing relationships between objects, senses, and interpretation, intermediality enables an approach to verbal narratives that does not take received forms of media, modes, or practices for granted. Developed partly from intertextual and inter arts approaches, intermediality has been used to expand and develop the study of literature in various directions. For instance, Wolf has shown that the way how intermedial relationships form literary texts can inform the study of literature on various levels, particularly in narratology [6]. Literary texts do not only refer to other texts, but always contain multiple media in what Bruhn calls “heteromediality” [7, 8]. Intermedial analysis can connect literary and media ecological approaches convincingly, as demonstrated by Johansson [9]. The study of world literature benefits from an intermedial perspective that considers the interplay between crossing media and geographical borders, as scholars such as Mousavi or Schlumpf have demonstrated [10, 11].

Literary scholars, at times, might feel pushed to the margins, as the role of books is decreasing. Moreover, a medial perspective can easily lose sight of the literary questions and establishing and keeping the balance in a more “systematic dialogue” can be challenging, Müller notes ([12], p. 2). However, broadening the scope of research to consider literature’s role “between media” [13] and exploring literary phenomena in close relation to other media offers new perspectives. Literature, then, can be seen as a “gearwheel within the broader realm of digital artworks, functioning seamlessly with wider intermedial processes” ([3], p. 2).

This article contributes to this exploration of mediality and literariness. It examines how intermediality offers a framework for understanding digital artworks, providing new insights into literary experiences. These experiences move beyond traditional concepts like book, author, text, and reader; instead, they point toward

the importance of embodied experiences, intersubjectivity, and co-creativity [14]. The following sections present intermediality as a theoretical approach with a specific focus on Elleström's media types and media modalities [15] as a suitable method to capture how digital technology transforms the perception literature. The analysis of the digital artwork *Evolution* (2014) by Heldén and Jonson traces how technological changes transform the literary experience compared to a printed poetry collection and AI-generated text. Thus, an intermedial perspective allows literary studies embedded in the contemporary hybrid media ecology.

2. Intermediality

Intermediality explores the relationships between and within different media, examining how they refer to and depend on one another, both explicitly and implicitly. It studies the dynamics that occur when media combine, transfer, and represent each other. In the humanities, intermediality is often used to analyse the relationships “between semiotic modes (image, sound, graphic signs), material media (paint, ink, electronic signals), and aesthetic media or systems of expression” as Grishakowa exemplifies ([16], p. 14). Yet intermedial relations also arise in what Chadwick calls “hybrid media systems” [17], where newer and older, digital and analogue, media logics intersect, or messages spread across media types and platforms ([18], p. 1). Thus, media and communication studies increasingly draw on intermediality to address hybridity and convergence in digital media [19, 20].

Emerging around the 2000s, intermediality has its roots in aesthetics, semiotics, comparative literature, media studies, and interart studies ([15], p. 9) (for more detailed historical and theoretical overviews, see also [16, 21, 22]). Partly in response to how the early stages of digitalisation highlighted the shaping force of media in communication, the theory allowed humanist researchers to investigate the connection between materiality and meaning in art and culture, dynamic relationships between words and images, or words and music, in visual or performing arts, or in individual artworks where media boundaries are actively crossed ([18], p. 9, [23], p. 85).

Since intermediality examines similarities between dissimilar media types, it is essential to find viable concepts for valid comparisons. Intermedial theory began addressing this challenge with typology, organising a hierarchy of media combinations, transformations, and representations (or intermedial references) [24–26]. However, typological differentiation also needs to focus on defining borders between media types. Due to the multimodal nature of communication, which is perceived in multisensory ways, conventional media borders blur upon closer inspection. As Mitchell noted, “all media are mixed media” [27], though they mix in different ways. Therefore, a more multimodal perspective on intermediality ([28], p. 254) acknowledges, as Elleström puts it, that “media are both different and similar, and intermediality must be understood as a bridge between media differences that is founded on media similarities” ([15], p. 5).

For viable intermedial comparisons, Elleström conceptualised a framework of media types and modalities built on shared characteristics of all media products: material objects (such as books, computers or soundwaves), communicative resources (such as text, images, light, sound or gestures), and the conventions of communication genres (such as literature, film or news). Elleström refers to these three aspects of each media product as *technical media of display*, *basic media types*, and *qualified media types* ([15], pp. 54–66). Furthermore, Elleström demonstrates how the intermedial relations between specific media products or types can be analysed by analysing their *material*,

sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic modes in the *media modalities* ([15], pp. 46–49). These four modalities help distinguish interactions with objects in space and time from the perception and interpretation of signs. They help to describe how the specific set of modes of a media product confirms or challenges conventional expectations within a particular media context. Thus, Elleström's framework allows for a fine-grained analysis of intermedial relationships as an interplay of similarities and differences.

An intermedial perspective thus broadens literary studies in several ways (for a longer discussion, see also [6]). Intermediality allows for the analysis of literature within an aesthetic network of arts and media and how literary texts have always been shaped by both technical media and conventions in different historical contexts [29, 30]. It allows for the approach of narration as a transmedial phenomenon that plays out in media-specific ways, for instance in novels, games, or images [31, 32]. It also allows to analyse the diegetic representation and structural imitation of art and media in literature and how these representations often imply a self-reflective discourse on the affordances,¹ that is possibilities and constraints, of words, texts, and literature [7, 36]. Intermediality enables literary studies to catch up with the intermedial practice of artists and authors who explore the tensions between materiality, affordances and conventions. Academic disciplines have long lacked the tools to analyse how the practices of other arts and media inform the writing of artists, composers, musicians, and filmmakers. Thus, intermediality provides a media-sensitive approach to studying literature that complements traditional narrative and poetic analysis [9]. Furthermore, intermediality can be used to address the complex, flexible, and fast-changing roles of words, texts, narratives, and literature in digital online communication, such as digital literature [37], audiobooks [38], and transmedial storyworlds [1, 39], to understand digital sharing and recycling practices on social media [40], as well as exploring the semiotic affordances of interactivity and hybridity [14, 41].

In this expanded perspective to verbal narratives and subjective experience, Elleström's media modalities offer a stable framework for analyses across or within media types. This is exemplified in the following intermedial analysis of the digital literary artwork *Evolution* (2014), compared to printed poetry and AI text generation. *Evolution* challenges traditional ideas about authorship and poetic expression. An intermedial analysis reveals how, despite being published over a decade ago, the artwork offers insights into today's discussions about human-machine interaction and the future of human creativity, especially with the advent of generative AI.

3. *Evolution* (2014) and the poetry of evolving meanings

Since the early 2000s, the Swedish interdisciplinary artist Johannes Heldén has published poetry, music, and digital artworks that explore posthuman relations with other species and technologies [42, 43]. *Evolution* (2014) is one of Heldén's digital artworks, created in collaboration with Håkan Jonson. The "online artwork-in-progress" is based on a database of all of Heldén's published text and sound works. On the webpage textevolution.net, the screen displays the image of an open book on a table. On its represented pages, an underlying algorithm generates a continuously evolving poem in

¹ Coined by psychologist James J. Gibson, the term "affordance" refers to the perceived potential in material and physical phenomena. It encompasses what environments can offer individuals [33], how the design of objects indicates their functions [34] and the possibilities and constraints of specific communicative resources in multimodal social semiotics [35].

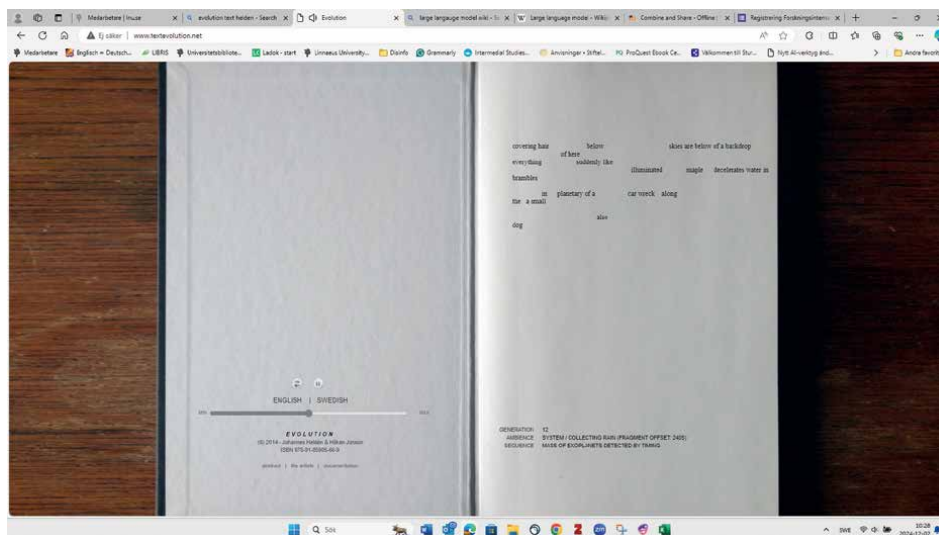


Figure 1.
 Screenshot from www.textevolution.net (for a full experience please visit the webpage).

the style of Heldén, accompanied by a randomised audio track derived from his sound artwork [44]. The application aims to evolve into a state where it is indistinguishable from Heldén’s poetry and thus passes the Turing test. It marks the end of Heldén writing poetry books as he “has, in a sense, been replaced” [44 “abstract”] (**Figure 1**).

The artwork challenges traditional understandings of poetry. When I present *Evolution* to literature students, some react harshly to a perceived destruction of poetry, while others are intrigued by alternative ways to engage with literature. How can we make poetic sense of autogenerated phrases? What new possibilities arise when replacing the author with an algorithm?

Some answers are found in the printed book *Evolution* [45], which publishes the underlying algorithm and structure of the artwork, intersected with short essays offering different interpretations. While Engberg suggests the artwork “gestures toward the contemporary condition of writing and reading in digital networked media” ([46], p. 34), Lindhé connects the title *Evolution* and the ephemeral reading experience to the reading (unfolding) of scrolls, “evolutio” in Latin ([47], p. 51). Olsson highlights how confronting poetry with binary code and computability shows that both rely on rules and calculations ([48], p. 39). *Evolution* is not the work of just one poet following specific rules to create a literary product. While it is not a “poem” in the traditional sense, it offers “new poetic statements based on Heldén’s [...] poetry” ([49], p. 59), Lien explains. Meaning arises in a creative, exploratory, co-creative process between author, programmer, user, software, and hardware, which highlights, according to Ingvarsson, that “all living things establish themselves, not as bodies or closed entities but as communicative systems” ([50], p. 59).

Both the digital artwork and the printed book *Evolution* defamiliarise² poetry, text, and reading; they thwart conventional literary expectations and conventional

² The artistic technique of defamiliarisation represents familiar objects, concepts, or experiences in an unfamiliar or strange way. In his article “Art as Device” (1917) Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky defined defamiliarisation as a central “device” of all poetic language and opposed to “automatic” everyday language use [51].



Figure 2.

From: Johannes Heldén, *Entropi*, (2010) ([52], p. 23).

reading practices and highlight how poetry and coding use text in different ways. On the artwork's webpage, the phrases that automatically appear and disappear are too ephemeral to form a distinct poem with specific meaning. Printed on pages, the algorithm cannot function as intended to generate the artwork. However, even if it remains opaque to readers unfamiliar with programming language, the book documents the code usually hidden behind the interface, a transparency which major online platforms are reluctant to reveal. The book not only switches between code and verbal language but also between different forms of reading verbal text. Short poetic fragments intersect the introductory history of artificial intelligence, forcing the reader to switch between primarily aesthetic and informational meaning-making.

3.1 Interaction, perception, spatiotemporality and interpretation of *Evolution* (2014)

From an intermedial perspective, both the digital artwork and the printed book *Evolution* draw attention to how materiality, perception, and convention inform interpretation. Books and digital devices are technical media of display that offer different ways to engage with the basic media type of text. Although both printed and digital text visually mediates verbal language, they can be considered different basic media types in Elleström's framework ([51], p. 56). Their material, sensorial, and spatiotemporal modes differ and shape the meaning-making process.

Comparing the digital artwork *Evolution* with Heldén's printed poetry reveals another set of similarities and differences. A screenshot from the webpage and a page from Heldén's printed poetry books might look similar at first glance (see **Figures 1** and **2**). Even in Heldén's printed poems, the phrases can be separated by irregular horizontal gaps and not always arranged in the conventional vertical columns of more or less regular lines. Yet the static layout presents distinct poems, one per page, and despite the gaps, the reader will most likely read the poems in the conventional

Western reading order. The use of italics for certain phrases and lines mediates the sense of different voices or threads. Moreover, in Heldén's anthology *Entropi* (2010, "Entropy") [53], there are already tendencies to disintegrate the poetic form further (see **Figure 2**). In this printed poetry volume, the phrases are printed in different shades of grey and thus in different levels of visibility, which transmediate the central theme of entropy as a "process of degradation" [52]. Different shades and fonts bring forth different thematic threads in each poem, which can be perceived as overlapping layers or voices, forming one poem together. An added CD-ROM, which cannot be read by current devices, suggests that *Entropi* was also published in a digital version.

Seen from this perspective, the digital artwork *Evolution* draws on digital affordances to further develop ideas from Heldén's previous poetic work. While a screenshot from *Evolution* transmediates a layout similar to Heldén's printed poetic work (see **Figures 1 and 2**), a more fine-grained intermedial analysis of *Evolution* with Elleström's concepts [15] highlights how material, sensorial, and spatiotemporal dissimilarities inform possible interpretations.

In the *material modality* users interact with *Evolution* through the screens and loudspeakers of a digital device. The screen displays the image of an open book on a table and literary paratexts, such as the title (on the right-hand page) and front matter like copyright and publication year (on the left). Thus, the webpage represents key features of printed books, but the digital text offers hyperlinks to choose between a Swedish and an English version. After this customisation, a poem appears but gradually changes; the speed of change can be adjusted via a bar on the left page. Thus, the interface design of *Evolution* creates a discrepancy between the material and the sensorial modality. Users see a book but interact *via* keyboard, mouse, or touchpad.

The affordances of digital screens directly impact the perception of text in the *sensorial modality*. Like printed pages, the screen displays visually mediated language, but in the form of digital text, it can easily be combined with digital images or, as in this case, sounds. However, the constant and abrupt changing soundscapes create a more disruptive than immersive audiovisual atmosphere. The interactive tension between the represented book and digital screen draws attention to the missing familiar haptic sense of holding the book and the familiar possibilities of interaction. Instead of turning pages, users see phrases appearing and disappearing, and a blinking cursor jumps between the gaps. *Evolution* creates a defamiliarising multisensory experience, which not only adds a disruptive auditory mode, but prevents the user from navigating independently.

The spatial and temporal relations of reading printed text are unhinged in the *spatiotemporal modality*. The phrases appearing and disappearing do not form a coherent poem in fixed sequentiality but forms a constantly developing, ephemeral process that probably never renders the same constellation of phrases again. The application controls all spatial and temporal modes we are used to controlling as readers of printed books, such as the choice of acoustic space and the partly fixed sequentiality of a book layout, which can be flipped through. Instead, the algorithm automatically generates a series of potentially meaningful phrases, which do not have a clear beginning or ending as the interface of the screen does not offer immediate sensorial and material spatial data that we can relate to the expected reading time. Not only the algorithm, but the spatial dimension of Heldén's collected works is hidden.

Other spatial and temporal modes of writing and publishing, usually controlled by the poet and publisher, are more open. The words and phrases are not presented in a fixed and stable layout; instead, the emerging phrases perform meaning-making as a

process, with the blinking cursor on the webpage highlighting the gaps. The relation between the constantly changing phrases is not based on the internal coherence of literary form and meaning. The gaps in *Entropi* still have a syntagmatic, rhythmical function in the poetic whole. In *Evolution*, the gaps between poetic fragments can only be bridged by the user's associations.

In the *semiotic modality*, the symbolic, habitual meaning of verbal language dominates the meaning-making process, but other, iconic and indexical sign relations, are present as well. The iconic representation of a book on a table can be seen as an intermedial reference to printed literature, the media type that the artwork self-reflectively engages with. However, the layout and spatial position of the phrases on the page cannot directly express diagrammatic iconic meaning, as the phrases and the space between words and lines constantly change and develop. Instead, the sounds of music and their potential iconic relations to inner states and emotions provide an interpretative atmospheric frame, which is constantly destabilised.

The artwork strengthens the indexicality of words and other data as traces. The poetic phrases are generated according to sequences displayed at the bottom of the page (see **Figure 1**), drawing on different data. Some sequences use data generated by human exploration of the universe, such as the “mass of exoplanetary systems detected by microlensing”, while others draw on data that relate changes of weather and climate, such as the “GISS surface temperature analysis” of global surface temperature over time, and the “atlas of extratropical storm tracks 1961–1998” or the “warming of the northern hemisphere land-ocean temperature index in 0.01 degrees Celsius, 1951–1980” (for the data of these tables, see [45]), others are playful and creative, such as “cups of coffee per episode of Twin Peaks”. While the sequences structure the automatic text generation, their choice and implication by association result from human intentional and playful choices.

Thus, *Evolution* presents poetry not as a fixed literary product but in the process of becoming poetry; different possibilities, choices, and words are tested not in the process of production (by a poet) but in the process of reception (by a reader). Instead of a poet's subjective self-expression, potential and associative meanings arise in the gaps between fragments. This associative meaning-potential works indexically like a clue: playful, tentative, and always open to revision. While the poet Heldén has taken a step back, he has framed the generative process with indices of human impact on Earth and expansion into space as a disquieting undercurrent, at times subverted by playfulness.

This intermedial analysis of *Evolution* in the media modalities highlights how changes in the material modality play out in sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic ways, defamiliarising the conventional understanding of how to approach poetry. The artwork might initially cause a sense of disempowerment; the reader loses control of how to interact with and perceive poetic meaning in traditional ways. At the same time, the artwork offers new ways to interact and engage in a co-creative meaning-making process. It breaks down the poem as a spatial object and highlights the poetic process, in which poetry evolves and develops out of fragmentary material. The literary interactive and associative experience, with the potential for tentative meanings, is not to be discovered, but playfully created. The search for a poetic self “behind the words” does not appear meaningful. The user is engaged in a process that “reveals the poet within,” to quote the slogan of so-called magnetic poetry. Words set in space as the material of written poetry are put to the fore, and their experience “as sound and images,” as Lars Elleström defines poetry [54], still plays a role. Thus, the artwork transmediates poetic experience.

3.2 Playing with meanings instead of looking for answers: An intermedial comment on generative AI

The algorithmic generation of poetic phrases paradoxically highlights the user's role in meaning-making. When engaging with *Evolution*, reading becomes less about decoding specific messages from senders and more about a co-creative process. This shift disrupts traditional book-based reading habits, yet it also offers insights for reflecting on emerging conventions for engaging with AI-generated texts.

The launch of the AI chatbot ChatGPT in 2022 amazed audiences, sparking both utopian hopes and dystopian fears regarding its potential to support, imitate, or replace human creativity. As “highly flexible and versatile conversational AI tools” [55], AI chatbots offer instantaneous answers to various questions and have the potential to disrupt all aspects of human communication, knowledge production [56], and creativity [41]. Like *Evolution*, AI chatbots present users with automatically generated text on screens. However, there is a fundamental difference in how this text is generated. While *Evolution*'s algorithm follows predefined rules and perform a specific task, Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT utilise machine learning *via* neural networks, software designed to mimic the structure of the human brain, which enables ChatGPT to process and produce natural language text ([55], p. 2). The way generative AI works has thus been described as a “black box”. One way to approach this challenge is by asking LLMs to explain themselves, using psychological methods developed to understand the human mind [57]. Another way is to explore generative AI in artistic ways, to move beyond artistic conventions but also as a means to explore the affordances of AI in hypermediated ways [41, 58].

Intermediality suggests approaching generative AI from the perspective of how we interact with it. An intermedial media-centred model on communication [59] promises not “to understand AI” but to understand how the kinds of media products AI generates are shaped by their technology, human perception and cognition, and contextual conventions. Working with AI is often intrinsically intermedial, such as generating visual and auditory products from verbal prompts ([41], p. 109). While the intermediality of AI is beyond the scope of this article, I will in the following only revisit the media modes of the digital artwork *Evolution* as analysed above and point out similarities and differences with AI-generated text, taking ChatGPT as an example.

In the *material modality*, both *Evolution* and ChatGPT structure their interfaces of digital technology based on familiar media types to frame the interaction, employing remediation in the sense defined by Bolter and Grusin [60]. *Evolution* displays a book page, while ChatGPT displays a digital resource for conversation: the familiar text bar for interacting with online content, posting comments, and retrieving information. However, while *Evolution*'s interface disrupts habitual interaction modes of both books and screens, the chatbot's interface (and even its name) follows and transmediates the conventions of (digital) conversations.

In the *sensorial modality*, *Evolution* constructs tension and disrupts habitual perceptions through constantly changing layout and soundscape. ChatGPT, in contrast, presents itself multimodally as a subject with the intention of helping and answering questions: both pictograms and text are used to guide users in employing the AI tool. Its otherwise neutral layout leaves empty spaces, as it is up to the user to define the tasks and establish context through dialogue. This reinforces ChatGPT's hybridity as a conversational tool, using dialogue and the exchange of ideas to solve tasks.

Spatiotemporally, the layout of *Evolution* transmediates poetry as a spatially fragmented, ever-changing phenomenon; text appears in phrases between gaps,

with a blinking cursor drawing attention not just to the text but also to the voids. ChatGPT's layout reinforces the sense of a counterpart through various design elements, such as placing the application's name as an equal counterpart to the user's login initials (see **Figure 3**). The blinking cursor does not jump but indicates the place of user activity. Responses appear sequentially, word by word, at immense speed. ChatGPT's material, sensorial, and spatiotemporal modes aim to create an immersive and uninterrupted digital dialogue which creates a sense of subjective presence. This contrasts sharply with *Evolution*'s focus on disruption and alternative modes of engagement.

In the *semiotic modality*, the mediation of generated text frames different forms of meaning-making. Both primarily mediate the habitual symbolic meaning of words, although ChatGPT, when asked, can generate images. However, *Evolution*'s poetic fragments leave the interpretation open to users and meaning is constantly shifting through the appearance and disappearance of phrases. ChatGPT, by contrast, generates coherent, linear responses in a helpful, positive, and assertive voice, even supported with emojis. The quickly generated text and the coherent dialogue create a sense of subjective presence that one finds difficult not to anthropomorphise. When engaging with ChatGPT in longer dialogues or exchanges of ideas, the sense of personality even increases and raises questions of sentience, intelligence, and personality [41, 56]. However, when asked to generate a poem in the style of Johannes Heldén, ChatGPT happily agrees and produces a traditional poem with a biological-digital imagery that blends two central themes of Heldén, such as “the forest whispers in binary” or “a breath misting algorithms”. While this includes playful elements, such as “roots network” (interpretable as both a verb and a noun), it bears little resemblance to Heldén's poetry and lacks the associative openness of *Evolution* (**Figure 3**).

While it is tempting to perceive this outcome as a mistake on the side of ChatGPT, the quality of ChatGPT's output depends significantly on the prompt, or as Lieb puts it, “the user typically achieves the results they deserve with this tech” [56], as

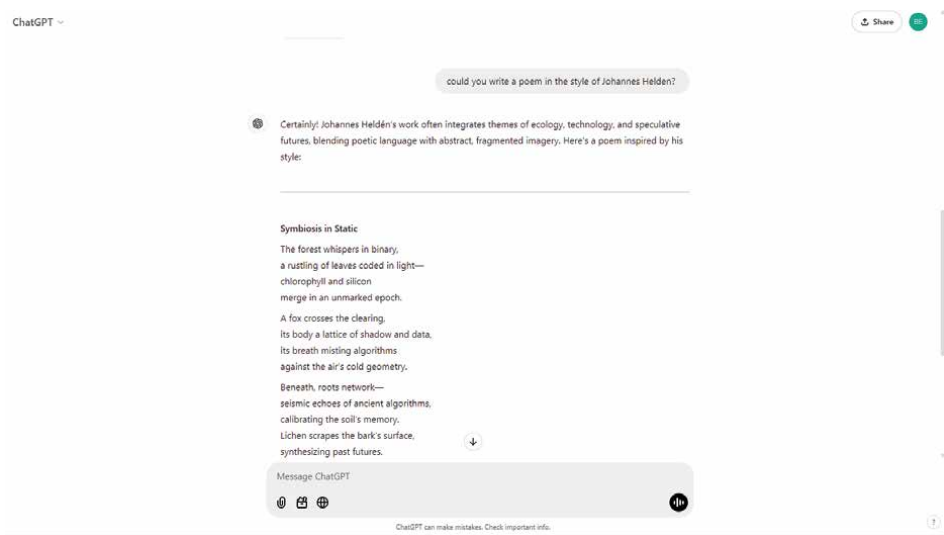


Figure 3.
Conversation with ChatGPT.

the results can only be drawn from what is available online and the specificity of the prompt given. Thus, the utility and truthfulness of AI-generated content rely heavily on the user's input quality and preciseness as well as on the user's readiness to refine the prompt.

There are numerous questions that humanists need to explore to enhance AI literacy, such as how AI's "imaginative potential" [41] transforms the notion of art and creativity. Comparing AI-generated text to *Evolution* highlights how AI's instant, comprehensive, and well-organised output delivered in a neutral tone can lead users to accept AI responses as final, rather than engaging critically with them. The potential unreliability of AI chatbots extends thus beyond hallucinations, when AI-generated output presents incorrect information in a plausible way [61]. While conversation, the human ability to engage with another person, is an effective and versatile tool for modelling human-machine interaction, it relies on an engaged, explorative, critical, and creative interlocutor to achieve constructive and robust results.

Whereas a generative AI chatbot mediates the sense of a counterpart, of a voice behind the words, the algorithmic text generation in *Evolution* serves as a self-reflective mirror, enabling users to perceive their own contributions to meaning-making. *Evolution* self-reflexively explores the affordances of interactivity and the conditions of digital meaning-making. Like other digital artworks [14], *Evolution* thus demonstrates how artistic engagement with new technology can highlight the gaps and the complex processes of translation that the design of digital tools tries to render as transparent and immediate as possible, and that we in everyday media use soon get used to. *Evolution* here encourages greater self-awareness among readers of digital texts, who are always prosumers³ and actively contribute to the answers to our questions. In addition, *Evolution* encourages greater self-awareness of how to engage with generative AI.

4. Conclusion

This article presented how intermediality can expand literary studies in several ways. It focused on how an intermedial perspective enables literary scholars to address the transformative complexities of digital media. The use of Elleström's intermedial framework in the analysis of Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson's digital artwork *Evolution* has revealed how restricting the habitual use of print and digital media allows users to discover other forms of interaction. The fine-grained analysis of the artwork in Elleström's media modalities demonstrates how digital technology transmediates, transfers, and transforms poetic experience. Additionally, the results highlight how digital art can defamiliarise the medial conditions of everyday online communication. Thus, Heldén's artwork also brings forth the user's role in digital meaning-making and interactive processes. In this respect, intermedial analysis provides a bridge between the analysis of literary artworks and everyday online communication.

The active role of digital audiences as users and prosumers is a central characteristic of digital networked communication, which Keylin terms a "mediality of own action" [64]. Interactivity not only changes communicative and social habits but also alters the way we construct knowledge and information ([65], p. 12). The quality of

³ Prosumer, a term coined by Alvin Toffler [62] describes a form of participation where production and consumption merge, for example, when interaction on social media platforms breaks down "the boundary between consuming and producing text" [63].

digital knowledge thus depends on the quality of one's network [66], and increasingly on the skill of collaborating with generative AI [56]. While interactivity is a term associated with online communication and specifically Web 2.0, we still need a better understanding of how digital interactivity and the human-machine interaction with neural networks, transform the roles of author and reader into co-creators, shifting the focus from products to processes, from originals to blends and hybrids.

In this exploration of online communication and generated content, the work of artists and humanist scholars is needed. Both the artwork *Evolution* and its intermedial analysis contribute to this exploration by drawing attention to how digital affordances challenge our received understanding of art and knowledge construction alike. Literary scholars are experts in how words can create facts, construct presence, and express subjectivity. This knowledge is more important than ever in a digital public sphere increasingly built upon engaging storytelling, where the border between real and fictive events blurs. Here, intermediality provides the bridge to discern the role of human narratives and aesthetic language use beyond printed books and the conventions of literature.

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Conflict of interest

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Sacred Signs or Empty Words: A Naturalistic and Semiotic Comparison of AI vs Human Generated Art

Dustin Hellberg

Abstract

This article analyzes the differences between human literary artistic works and those generated by AI programs like Chat GPT. While interesting as a technology, could AI ever be said to generate a work of art or literature? This paper differentiates AI generated writing from human generated writing by appeal to humans' evolved sociability, especially the human capacity for joint intentionality. The blurry nature of authorship and text becomes more clear by examination through Charles Peirce's semiotic system, especially his notions of the rheme and dicisign. It furthers this point through examining the *Umwelt* of institutional facts and sacredness in esthetic texts.

Keywords: AI writing, Peirce, dicisigns, joint intentionality, Searle, esthetics

1. Introduction

Writing to John Locke in 1688, William Molyneux posed a thought experiment. He asked:

A Man, being born blind, and having a Globe and a Cube, nigh of the same bignes, Committed into his Hands, and being taught or Told, which is Called the Globe, and which the Cube, so as easily to distinguish them by his Touch or Feeling; Then both being taken from Him, and Laid on a Table, Let us Suppose his Sight Restored to Him; Whether he Could, by his Sight, and before he touch them, know which is the Globe and which the Cube? Or Whether he Could know by his Sight, before he stretch'd out his Hand, whether he Could not Reach them, tho they were Removed 20 or 1000 feet from Him? (qtd in Degenaar [1])

Molyneux's query was whether differing sense perceptions could overlap sufficiently in the mind such that learning (experiencing) through one sense would allow another sensory apparatuses to understand the object coherently. Would someone born blind who learned geometrical shapes through touching blocks be able to recognize those same shapes (without touching) were the blind person suddenly given

sight? Locke did not write back to Molyneux for some time, though he later helped to champion the thought experiment by including it in his own essays which gave it a much wider audience. While the thought experiment is quite interesting, its metaphor is striking when it comes to comparing AI versus human generated texts. Since AI¹ generated writing has exploded in frequency, quality and accuracy, it is imperative to understand what it is and what it is not. AI writing has proven to be a bane to most who teach composition at the high school and college levels, and it is almost universally considered cheating in that context. However, I have seen (and have heard of) instances of AI generated writing used in creative writing classes. Hence it raises the further question, ‘Could AI writing be considered valid as art?’ This paper will focus on the esthetic value of AI generated texts versus humans’, and will argue that they are intrinsically different when seen through naturalistic and semiotic models.

There may be some merit and value to using AI writing as a tool,² but it poses a valid question about esthetics. Are AI generated texts art? Do they have any esthetic value? As paralleled above, were we to give a computer the architecture of a human mind and the ability for human expression, could it -as the blind person suddenly seeing- approximate art in any real or valid fashion? As AI models become more powerful and more ‘creative’, will they blaze new trails of human understanding and expression that had hitherto been unexplored? While it’s obvious that AI programs do not go through the anguish of writing bad breakup poetry or of finding ‘le mot juste’, as Flaubert would have it, it’s not quite enough to dismiss the phenomenon simply because AI models cannot have their hearts broken or suffer for their art.³ But it is here that a potential answer begins to take shape. Suffering for one’s art (whether one is van Gogh or an emo punk band rehearsing in a garage) requires a stance toward esthetic objects and production that is at least partially by the fact that humans evolved to be esthetic creatures. Not every event in every human day is a matter of intention on the part of the individual, but when it comes to art, it has to be. Even found art, like Duchamp’s *Fountain*, requires at least that someone (creator, viewer, buyer, detractor) understand it as an intentional esthetic object.⁴ This has less to say about what constitutes ‘good’ esthetic objects versus ‘bad’ ones than how we may define them at all. It seems, at least partially, to center around intention. AI generated writing has no intention behind it, either to be art or to not be art. It is a matter of inputs and outputs. One may posit that it’s the same with humans: Input (culture, language, learning), output (*Las Meninas*, *The Great Picture Book of Everything*, Chauvet Cave).⁵ There is, however, more to it.

¹ I make no distinction between types of AI models (NLP, Deep Learning, etc.). The term AI has become general enough to use as a stand in, much like xerox, band-aid or the neologism of using Google as a verb. ‘Have you ever googled your own name?’

² I’ve found none yet. Though the 2024 Nobel Prize in chemistry went to a team who used AI programs to design and predict protein structures. Of the three recipients -it should be noted- the AI program was not one of them.

³ Though a glance at most artists’ lives may indicate that suffering to some degree seems necessary.

⁴ And did not Surrealism die when Breton came out with the *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924? Even they (and the Dadaists) could not escape the framework of intention.

⁵ And if I am understanding them correctly, this seems to be the argument against free will as stated by people like Sam Harris and Robert Sapolsky. They would add ‘evolution and genetics’ to the input side of the equation.

From an evolutionary point of view, human artistic practice is a curious thing. It occupies vast swaths of our time, either creating it or consuming it. Some, like Denis Dutton (*Art Instinct*) [2], see artistic practice as an offshoot of evolution, an esthetic hardwiring that -like our capacity for language- is plastic enough to conform to cultural norms while still remaining a human universal. Every human culture, as far back into our archeological past as we can see, had art. Therefore it must be related somehow to evolution. Similar cases have been made by Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall and Brian Boyd [3–5].⁶ Regardless of art's provenance and scaffolding in the brain under the influences of evolution, intention is fundamental to esthetic creation and evaluation. As Raymond Tallis says, "There is nothing elsewhere in nature comparable to intentionality. It [is] the key to our human differences: our subjectivity; our sustained self-consciousness; our sense of others as selves like us; first- and second-person being; our ability to form intentions; our freedom; and our collective creation of a human world offset from nature" ([6], p. 105). While it's true that some animals display what appears to be second order thinking (tool use or deception in crows, for example), it is vanishingly rare. If we took Tallis' list above, we may well find some analogs in the animal kingdom, especially among our great ape cousins. However, there is no quality in that list to which we could ascribe AI.

The problem at this level is rooted in the human species' evolutionary history. As a highly individuated yet highly social species, it should be that evolution steered the species in such a way to compensate for these two (often incommensurate) parts of the human psyche. How did our species function successfully while balancing the needs of the group versus the needs of the individual?⁷ Group survival and cohesion required a shared goal in which individuals would act toward the betterment of the group in order to further individual purposes. As David Wilson and EO Wilson note, "Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary" [7].⁸ As Tallis [6] notes above, intention seems to be a natural feature unique to humans. Morality, according to Michael Tomasello [11], seems another uniquely human trait. Morality obviously relates to intention, though they are different in terms of sequence.⁹ As Tomasello says, "The uniquely human cognitive abilities responsible for the evolution of human morality, especially with regard to a sense of fairness and justice, all fall under the general rubric of *shared intentionality*" (author's italics 50) [11]. The author notes that humans operate with a dual-level set of goals where individuals understand themselves to be both a 'we' and a 'differentiated self' with shared but ultimately separate goals and perspectives. We create social trust through our understanding of our own and each other's "joint agency" when we participate in social activities (p. 51). Collaboration of this sort, as a way of understanding where human morality and intention arise, provides an interesting hypothesis as to how nature mitigated humanity's extreme individuality and extreme sociability. The relationship of esthetic practice draws a strong parallel. The human love for esthetic consumption relies on the shared intentionality of those

⁶ Carroll is the creator of a field called Literary Darwinism, a subset of evolutionary esthetics.

⁷ This clearly has some relation to 'the problem of the commons', but I am leaving that topic alone here.

⁸ This paper is not concerned with altruism. For other papers that align science, semiotics, the arts and altruism see: Hellberg "Funny" [8], Hellberg "Peirce" [9] or Hellberg "How You Know" [10].

⁹ Intention is the framework for morality, and morality is the retroactive evaluation of the results of those intentions. A sense of morals guides action and therefore guides intention while intention steers the sense of morality. It is clearly a complicated and interrelated system.

that create the esthetic objects. So, whether esthetic practice is an evolved trait or behavior, it seems nonetheless part of the machinery, already extant in the human social brain/mind. AI clearly did not evolve to have any level of joint attention, joint intention or first-/second-level joint agency. AI art will continue to come closer and closer to aping human expression¹⁰ and will blur the boundaries of what we call good poetry or prose, what we call beautiful or meaningful or soulful. But is this already an objection to its esthetic value?

It may be unfair to indict AI writing in this way. Of course it did not evolve in the same way that our species did. One may well indict it for not having a pulse or for not being slightly cross-eyed and use that as the differentiating reason why AI writing cannot be esthetic in the same way that human writing can. AI art occupies a strange space. It is not directly a form of plagiarism. It is not exactly a forgery either, but it shares several similarities to forgeries. It may be of some import to tease out a distinction regarding forgeries here to demonstrate the ways in which forgeries are viewed before turning to the semiotic distinctions which will further clarify the esthetic distinctions between AI and human writing.

Forgeries are a common enough human occurrence. For example, half of the Pauline letters from the New Testament are likely forgeries (Ehrman [12], pp. 177–205), altered by later adherents for socio-cultural purposes to steer the early religion in desired directions. To a believer, this may be hardly of note. The text is held on faith. To a nonbeliever, it merely discredits the text even further as a human invention. The difference here is whether the *text* is genuine or not. Humans place value on genuine things, be they real or abstract, things like a marriage vow, a promise, a religious belief, a social norm, friendship. These things are all very much real, though they are hard to qualify in the same way that a real thing (say, a hammer) can be qualified. John Searle calls the former ‘institutional facts’ and the latter ‘brute facts’. He says, “Some facts exist independently of any human institution. I call these brute facts. But some facts require human institutions to exist at all” ([13], p. 10). A marriage vow is no less real than a hammer in a belt loop, but their status as genuine necessarily differs based on their relationship to joint intention. I do not need joint intentionality to pick up the hammer and build a bookshelf. I absolutely require it (between myself and my betrothed and the larger society) as an institutional fact. Forgeries operate in the same way. A forgery is reviled precisely because it violates its status as institutional fact. It violates the joint intentionality as to its value. It attempts to piggyback the social status of this or that individual (say, St Paul) in order to gain value through genuineness that it does not have. As Denis Dutton says of forgeries:

Aesthetic perception and evaluation must take into account the individual nature or essence of its objects; not to do so is to distort aesthetic experience by introducing categorical frameworks, or by introducing no framework at all ... Forgery, then, is intrinsically aesthetically wrong because aesthetic experience should take into account the what-it-is of its object, and forgery, by its very nature, frustrates this aim by presenting us with an object purporting to have an essence which it does not in fact have. Doing so warps aesthetic judgment and introduces aberrations into aesthetic perception (Forger's [14], pp. 218-219).

¹⁰ As someone who reads a lot of freshman comp essays, the AI writing could not be more clear in its robotic tone, monotonous vocabulary and lack of basic grammar/usage errors.

The essence spoken of here is the joint intentionality of the genuineness of the institutional fact. The forgery lacks the indexical link to the actual artist (hence the artwork is not an indexical sign that physically relates to the creating artist). So, AI writing, though a brute fact, is not a genuine institutional fact and cannot possess shared joint intention to be a similar esthetic object because an AI cannot intend anything except to copy. It is much like *Bartleby*. While not a direct forgery, AI art approaches a hybrid forgery of sorts. Because it cannot intend to be a forgery, its value as a potential esthetic object is lessened. Unlike the forgers of the Pauline epistles, AI just follows its programming. I will turn now to semiotics as a way of distancing AI versus human texts from one another.

2. Signs of meaning: The semiotic side

The semiotic system of Charles Peirce, as with his philosophy, has made great strides outside of philosophy departments in the last three decades. Though Peirce is not a household name, he is coming to be more well known in broader and broader fields (as with the token/type distinction). His semiotic system, especially in literary studies, remains entirely overshadowed by Saussure.¹¹ Saussure was picked up by the structuralists and poststructuralists as a framework for their ideas. Still, because of its relative complexity, a brief overview of Peirce's semiotics will be of help here.¹² Peirce sees everything as a sign in relation to another sign, a sort of evolving web of meanings extending through signs and further interpretations of these signs. A word is a sign, a flower is a sign and the word flower is yet another sign. His system is triadic in how the sign functions, being that, for him, each sign has three parts:¹³ the representamen, the object and the interpretant. Peirce says, "A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates call the interpretant ... The sign stands for something, its object" (*Collected Papers* 2.228) [16]. In this sense, the sign's triadic relationship is as follows. The word 'flower' is a representamen of an actual flower (or imagined one) being referred to. The individual interpretation of that flower that may come to mind when hearing or reading the word is the interpretant. In his evolving system, an interpretant may lead to a new representamen by way of increasing/decreasing/recontextualizing the 'ground' of the representamen. If a lifelong shut-in knows only that 'flower' refers to a particular rosebush visible out the back window, then that interpretant of the representamen 'flower' is limited to that particular object. If that same shut-in receives a bouquet of lilies in the mail one day, the ground of the representamen 'flower' has now evolved to include those two

¹¹ See footnote 13.

¹² Saussure referred to his field as semiology whereas Peirce used semiotics. The -ology versus -ic endings can find parallels in those sciences that use these endings like biology versus physics.

¹³ As opposed to the other competing semiotic model from Ferdinand de Saussure which is commonly understood to be dyadic. John Ellis [15] outlines the ways that the dyadic model is incorrect and details the ways that the postmodernists misread Saussure's system which seems to also be triadic like Peirce's, though in different ways. It is also an interesting fact that both Saussure and Peirce were working on their semiotic systems around the same time.

objects (rosebush in yard and flowers that come in the mail). Signs invariably evolve since Peirce sees everything as a sign.¹⁴

Now that Peirce's concept of the sign has been sketched out, there must follow an explanation of the various types of signs that he envisions. Signs come in nine basic types for Peirce. They are arranged in threes, increasing in their interpretational complexity and what they do as signs.¹⁵ These then form ten amalgam signs which will be discussed further on. The first order of signs contains the qualisign, sinsign and legisign. "The English word 'airplane' is a legisign ... It is not a singular object residing in someone's brain ... On the other hand, a particular utterance of the word 'airplane' ... is embodied in a singular event making it a sinsign" (de Waal [17], p. 73). The qualisign would be the shape of the letters composing each instance of the word. If the font of the word were changed, the qualisign would thereby have changed. For Peirce, these three sign types constitute 'Firsts'. They are immediate and very ephemeral because the moment they are perceived, they become what Peirce calls 'Seconds'. Reflection or analysis of the 'Seconds' brings about 'Thirds'.¹⁶ Their sign type changes to a new level of understanding in which the above-noted evolution of the sign takes place. If the child raises a hand to passing plane and says, 'Snorgeldox', it is certainly a sinsign, though it has no contextual relationship to anything as it has no ground.

This brings us to Peirce's next three sign types. These, if one has had any dealing in Peircean semiotics, will be the most familiar as they are the most commonly referenced types of signs. These are the icon, index and symbol. Icons signify through similarity, though it is not always exactly through perceptual similarity. A drug addict standing on the street corner can be an icon for drug addiction (or shown in contrast as a cautionary example), even though it's not directly similar. A typical iconic sign would be emoticons in text messages. Happy face, quizzical face, sad face. No human face has ever been round and yellow like an emoticon, yet the iconic meanings of each are readily evident.¹⁷ The indexical sign gains meaning through some direct relationship to the object. If someone, waking up at two in the morning, smells smoke, the smoke can be indexical of the house being on fire or simply fire itself. Upon investigation, if the person finds out that the smoke is coming from a neighbor burning leaves, the index's interpretant changes from 'house on fire' to 'idiot neighbor burning leaves at all hours'. In either case, the smoke is indexical to the fire and the fire's ground or context. Without the fire in this context, the smoke is indexical¹⁸ to something else. The last sign in this taxa, symbols, are more arbitrary since they needn't have similarity or physical relationships to their objects. There is a contingent essence to symbols in Peirce's view, especially in relation to words as these are necessarily arbitrary in the meaning they convey in relation to the objects they are associated with. A fingerprint left at a crime scene is an index of the criminal while it can be iconic of the criminal's presence (as it may prove to be someone else if the print were mishandled and misinterpreted), and the print can be symbolic of the criminal's potential guilt. In this sense, a work of art can be indexical in relation to the artist. No fire, no smoke. No

¹⁴ He uses this process as a vehicle for how knowledge develops in his philosophy Pragmatism.

¹⁵ Peirce's views of these sign categories did evolve, though that lies beyond the scope here.

¹⁶ For the sake of brevity, Peirce's triadic categories will have to go unexplored.

¹⁷ Except that I constantly have to ask students or my nieces what particular emoticons mean. Their interpretants change so often.

¹⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire's calligram, 'Il pleut', is at once iconic and symbolic and potentially indexical if one is standing outside in the rain while reading it.

artist, no art. Indices here, when seeing the text as an index, are physical extensions of the artist. Forgeries seek to be indexical to someone else than the forger and are hence merely icons. The text can be iconic in that it seeks to represent the world, but its indexical value is absent.

The next set of sign types are the more complex trifacta of the rheme, dicisign and argument.¹⁹ It is here best to let Peirce provide his definitions of each:

A rheme is a sign which, for its interpretant, is a sign of qualitative possibility, that is, is understood as representing such and such a kind of possible object ... A dicent sign [dicisign] is a sign, which, for its interpretant, is a sign of actual existence. It cannot, therefore, be an icon, which affords no ground for an interpretation of it as referring to actual existence ... An argument is a sign which, for its interpretant, is a sign of law. Or we may say that a rheme is a sign which is understood to represent its object in its characters merely; that a dicisign is a sign which is understood to represent its object in respect to actual existence; and that an argument is a sign which is understood to represent its object in its character as a sign. (CP 2.250)²⁰

So, to begin to interweave Peirce into an esthetic distinction between human and AI generated writing or art, one could posit that AI generated writing is an iconic sign because it resembles that which it represents. Its object is human language or art while its representamen -language- is the same as with the human production. As human art is an expression of a human self, the artistic product would necessarily be indexical in some way as the extension of a quality of mind or experience that has been rendered up. When we evaluate the piece of art, we see it as a symbol and thus open to multiple interpretations. AI generated writing or art has no possible indexical relation to stand as the sign's object in the object/representamen/interpretant schema as the index has to relate to something real. But, this does not quite distinguish these categories well enough.

Peirce created a further web of signs by compounding the nine sign types listed above into ten categories:²¹ (1). rhematic-iconic qualisign; (2). rhematic-iconic sinsign; (3). rhematic-indexical sinsign; (4). dicent-indexical sinsign; (5). rhematic-iconic legisign; (6). rhematic-indexical legisign; (7). dicent-indexical legisign; (8). rhematic-symbolic legisign; (9). dicent-symbolic legisign; and (10). argument-symbolic legisign. Though convoluted, these trichotomies will help to clarify between the semiotic and esthetic values of AI and human generated writing/art. As already noted, AI art necessarily lacks any collective intentionality or joint agency. It lacks the evolved tendency to produce or consume art and thus what it creates, as already noted, can only be iconic and never sign as index. By looking at the Peircean cladistic above, it must be noted that the dicisign (dicent sign) never interacts with the icon sign type. The rheme trichotomy intersects with the icon, index and symbol but not the dicisign. AI art would lack any relation to the indexical portion of the trichotomy, thus rendering it rhematic at best. To quote Peirce again, "A dicent sign [dicisign] is a

¹⁹ One of the more frustrating aspects of Peirce's work is that he constantly swapped terminology as his ideas evolved.

²⁰ I have left out Peirce's capitalizations of the sign types to avoid any confusion as to why the other instances of the terms aren't capitalized.

²¹ Though he does not give them these names. I am writing them out in full as his schematic is not at all clear in this section of the text.

sign, which, for its interpretant, is a sign of actual existence. It cannot, therefore, be an icon” (CP 2.250). As regards the semiotic value of the signs, AI art is potentially a 1. rhematic-iconic qualisign, 2. rhematic-iconic sinsign, 5. rhematic-iconic legisign or 8. rhematic-symbolic legisign, but it can never be 3. rhematic-indexical sinsign or 6. rhematic-indexical legisign because these involve the indexical sign. This further shuts down possible semiotic values for AI generated texts. Human signs can be iconic in that they resemble reality as a story might. Texts are also symbolic signs in that language functions by contingency and convention. But, because human texts are also indexical, these texts elicit through a shared joint intentionality the lived in existential and emotional value of the indexical sign, the very real readily evident physical sign.

To simplify, from hereon, only the terms dicisign and rheme will be used instead of the trichotomies²² and these are to be understood to cover their respective manifold trichotomies. As noted, the dicisign should then relate to some reality. It must be beholden to some transaction between subject and world. The world becomes the object and the artistic expression is the representamen. The rheme need not relate to reality directly as it need only (due to its relation to possibility only) represent it. The difference here is subtle but important. If we hold up AI generated art and examine its sign category, it would necessarily be a rheme. It cannot be a dicisign because the dicisign is a sign “of actual existence”, even in the 9th category of the dicisign-symbolic sinsign. It is answerable to that existence, to that reality. The AI rheme does not involve itself through the sign in that way. So, when looking at a work of literature, for example, one might classify it as a rheme because of the many ways of interpreting it. As John Sheriff notes:

Since a poem (or any work of literature) is experienced as a rhematic symbol, it is a distortion to equate it with a proposition [meaning dicisign, my note] or argument ... Anytime one says anything about the rheme produced by the reading of a text, he is unconsciously allowing the interpretant (rheme) to become a new representamen, which determines a new interpretant ... In other words, he turns a sign of imaginative possibility into a new sign of imaginative possibility. ([18], p. 81)

Peirce sees these as nesting in one another. If we see a work of art as rhematic symbol, the dicisign interpretant of that rhematic symbol is the interpretation of it. Think of it like a text and a literary theory analyzing that text. The argument would be a larger-scale framework into which the dicisign would fit.²³ In this view, the text itself is the rheme and the dicisign is the interpretation of that rheme. However, in the comparison of AI versus human art, the signs themselves cannot be the same because they have a different provenance. Hence, the difference in the categorization.²⁴ The influences of evolutionary pressures, the social agency of writing (or creating), the

²² It should also be noted that Peirce does not see these signs as constituting each other in this hierarchy. As Frederik Stjernfelt makes clear, “Dicisigns are not built from rhemes and arguments not from dicisigns –even if they do contain them” (78).

²³ Say, text interpreted by literary theory interpreted by theory of human behavior like evolutionary theory.

²⁴ Could we not merely say that evolution, having programmed our species, is not categorically different from the AI programmer? Again, no, because the AI text is at best using recursive iconic representation while the human uses iconic and indexical representations. AI’s iconic referentiality has no stable body semiotic to refer to in regards to intentional textual production.

ability to interpret and reinterpret are existential experiences that AI writing lacks. Hence, we see the human generated text as a *dicisign*. But what if.

The upshot of this distinction is that it does not preclude the AI text from being classified as a specifically esthetic object. A forgery can still be an esthetic object. A pinecone can be if we put it up on the wall and call it art.²⁵ Again, AI cannot hope to intend anything here. As hopefully established, the AI text/work cannot be indexical or be a *dicisign*. But what if a computer programmer programs an AI to 'intend'? Again, how could it? It lacks any agential input.²⁶ Indeed, were we to build an automaton run by this AI, it may have interactions with the environment, learn new dance steps or it may have "seen things you people would not believe. Attack ships on fire off [the] shoulder of Orion. [Have] watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain" (*Blade Runner*) [20]. The replicants in this science fiction movie are not human, despite their self-awareness, self-expression and fear of death. They are what they were programmed to be. One could say that evolution did the same to humans, but billions of years of evolutionary pressures on all antecedent species leading up to humans dwarf what a few decades of programming can do. Besides, the semiotic values are simply not the same. As Jesper Hoffmeyer says, "There is an irreplaceability to living things ... that we cannot avoid recognizing because it comes from a corporeal existence that we know in ourselves ... The corporeality of the human being is therefore ... the key to our ability to empathize with *the other* ... We must empathize with the other for the sake of the biosemiotic body self" ([21], pp. 325–326). The self as mediated sign recognizes a similar sign value in other, similar creatures. We recognize a value in the indexical and *dicisign* qualities of a text, just as we recognize the shared humanity in those around us. The replicant may fool us, may move us to tears, but its core body semiotic (to use Hoffmeyer's phrase) is inherently different. This is because:

[t]he functional definition of dicisigns - signs performing two simultaneously different functions relating to the same objects, those of reference and description- transgresses the idea that propositions should depend upon the syntax of human language exclusively, opening the investigation of other syntactical combination strategies fulfilling the function to be charted in non-linguistic signs in human and non-human semiotics (Stjernfelt [22], p. 102).

The semiotic self as *dicisign*, just as with the human produced text as *dicisign*, is reflexive through the body semiotic in ways that are not only linguistic. We breathe. We slump and slouch. We puff our chests and feel pride. Again, the AI text as icon or symbol or rheme cannot be indexical, cannot be physical except as mediated by further text or coded in ones and zeroes. The propositions shared between entities in this sense (body language, for example, as part of the given ground/context of the interpretant) is something that a clever replicant can mimic but cannot meaningfully embody because it has only been programmed to do so.²⁷

²⁵ What Ellen Dissanayake calls 'making special' [19].

²⁶ I'm sure that there is an incoming AI esthetic theory based on some posthumanist paradigm that I am unaware of. If memory serves, this was part of the point of o-o-o (Object oriented ontology) which I was either too stupid or too smart to understand.

²⁷ This is a theme so replete in science fiction that I could not hope to scratch its surface here.

3. Sacredness of meaning: The institutional side

But part of this paper was not just to downgrade AI writing in relation to the human variety. The intention was to separate and limit its comparative esthetic value. A rheme as a sign can still have meaning and if it has meaning, it's a potential work of art. The semiotic value of each has already been demonstrated, but there still exists the possibility of a text produced by an AI program. Looking to John Searle, he says:

For example, when we are thinking in English, the English words going through our minds are not just uninterpreted formal symbols; rather, we know what they mean. For us the words have a meaning, or semantics. The mind could not be just a computer program because the formal symbols of the computer program by themselves are not sufficient to guarantee the presence of the semantic content that occurs in actual minds. (Mystery [23], p. 10)

This is not merely another differentiation that 'computers don't have hearts and therefore can't create art'. The semantic versus syntactic difference strikes the issue at its core. The AI program may learn to 'write' more artistically,²⁸ but it will never be able to do anything but produce texts syntactically. The words have no semantic meaning behind them because the words have no indexical relationship to a shared reality or existence. They are syntactic icons that take on the shape of human language without the ability to intend, even, to pretend.

To pretend to do something is an intentional act. A poem or short story or novel need not be true to be works of literature. In this way, they might seem to fail the discursive criterion of being true or false regarding an existential reality. But they need not be true accounts to be true in that sense. The works of art are real and thus are true of the world without needing to be true about the world. As Searle says, "There is no textual property, syntactic or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it" ("Logical Status" [24], p. 325). No intention, no art. Yet again, the difference in the kind of text produced by a computer is readily evident. From a semiotic perspective, the types of texts produced have been shown to be different and thus cannot be interpreted in the same ways. AI art does not rise as esthetic objects to begin with, no matter how complex they eventually become. These programs may be of some practical use, but art needn't be practical in its bearing.

And here, through appeal to utility, the boundaries of what AI versus human art become more stark. While there is an epistemic relationship between the two as 'texts', there is also a functional gulf between them. Art is a function of being human. It is a human universal. There has never been a culture that did not have some form of esthetic practice that was necessarily different from artisan products.²⁹ Human products become environments to which we react, be they esthetic, quotidian or

²⁸ Only possible by letting it scrape more and more copyrighted material from the internet. That raises a whole host of ethical quandaries.

²⁹ Which certainly can rise high in esthetic value. This is not to downgrade artisanal products.

institutional. As shown, the semiotic process is not only linguistic. It is the entire interaction between the individual and its *Umwelt*, its environment. Jakob von Uexhull says of this:

The Umwelt is then the crucible of the animal's informational relationships, perforce the meaningful ones, with the environment. In fact, for the animal, the environment consists of these sign relationships, with conspecifics, with predators and prey, with shelter, weather and terrain, and with odors, sounds and silence. In many respects this anticipates and complements the notion of the niche as high-dimensional hyperspace. (qtd in Wheeler [25], p. 120, author's emphases)

The semiotic process, in Peirce's model, is transactional, natural and textual, depending on the type of sign being perceived. The new 'environment' it creates can be both figurative and physical as the new interpretant leads to a further representamen on out into the future.³⁰ Because AI interacts with its linguistic-only environment, its inputs are necessarily limited in ways that the human's is not. This is the index versus icon sign from earlier. Both humans and AI can produce symbols because both can use figurative language. But, only one, through recourse to evolutionary forces that shape the human self, can produce indices, and thus has a semiotic relationship that is more rich and varied. And hence it has a different and greater value.

To venture a personal angle on the topic, perhaps there is an instinctive distrust of AI art because it's artificial, not only in a mechanistic way but precisely because an AI program is not afraid of death, is not tired of watching loved ones die, is not haunted by insecurities and physical pain. AI art does not appreciate these fundamental artistic subjects because it cannot participate as a subject in those human metaphysical quandaries like the Good, the True or the Sacred. Even an atheist like myself can recognize the value of the Sacred. As Roger Scruton says of it, "Only when we are sure that this moment of the real presence exists in the human being who experiences it, can we then ask the question whether it is or is not a true revelation -a moment not just of faith but of knowledge, and a gift of grace" ([26], p. 23). Even a nonbeliever like me can recognize in works of art some hint or guess at or reaching toward something bigger than the artist, the human, the mortal. Call it sacred or ethereal or ephemeral or eternal, it has a real person behind it, a body semiotic one could reach out to touch, be it a hand or the work of art. The sacred is important to human life, be one religious or secular. It's yet another environment, another *Umwelt*, with which we interact as much as hills or subways, operas or video games. And as a matter of someone else's sincere expression we can call it art. Much like Molyneux' question that opened this paper, we have provided these AI programs with a human sensory apparatus called language and yet the AI programs will remain forever blind to what that language expresses, describes and means, forever inarticulate of the varieties, shapes and forms of being human.

³⁰ Some have tried to make the case that this makes Peirce effectively a relativist, since the chain of interpretant to representamen to new interpretant, etc., could extend on forever. Peirce held that there was a winnowing effect of new knowledge that necessarily removes bad information from the cycle (so long as the knowledge is held). Once Copernicus unseated Ptolemy his system had no purchase on reality except as a historical entity.

4. Conclusion and further discussion

I spend at least an afternoon per week walking or reading or musing on one of the many beaches of Nassau. I find any number of sea shells and sea fans and pieces of sea glass distributed there. I find exceptional beauty in the skeletons of sea urchins that resemble tiny fractals or cathedrals or whorled galaxies, their stippled frames curving in fragile white arcs. Picking one from the white sand, I could no more call it art than the ocean itself. I can give it as a gift to a loved one (they make exceptional gifts if you can find them unbroken), and we may both call the item beautiful or exquisite, but we cannot call it art. If I paint it, adorn it, smash it on my head while performing on a stage, then it has been altered. It has been made an esthetic object. It has gone from accidental to intentional. Wielding Peirce's semiotics will invariably arouse contrarian interpretations of what is each sign's actual value or application or meaning. The same can be said for any use of esthetics. The questions of 'for whom, to whom, by whom' will always arise. This article puts forth no esthetic theory,³¹ merely how 'esthetic' an AI versus a human text can be according to a necessarily brief reading of naturalistic and semiotic analyses. Evolutionary influences like joint intentionality or esthetic sensitivity are unique to humans precisely because we are aware of them to varying degrees. The beautiful courtship displays of birds or their flashy plumage are functions of evolution (natural or sexual) affecting their behavior. It is true that humans are affected in similar ways, but the main difference is that we exercise second order thinking about such choices. As I hope to have shown, because humans have the ability to share higher level cognitive ideas such as government, marriage, currency or art, it differentiates such a capacity not only from other animals but from AI produced works. The semiotic values of these produced works (signs) further helps to differentiate the types of art. Let us say there is an AI writing poems. A nearby printer is churning out page after page. They pile up in the tray and drift to the floor as each new page pushes forth the former. If someone comes along and picks up a sheaf of these poems and passes them off as their own, so be it. We can call them forgeries or failures, brilliant and incisive poems, but it is only in the intentional, human act of labeling these esthetic objects that they become so. It is only by human association that their sign value changes from icon to index, rheme to dicisign. Now, whether anyone finds these poems beautiful or interesting is another story. Will AI lead to new definitions of esthetic objects or help humans redirect energy toward an as of yet unseen horizon? Will future interface between the brain and technology erect new vistas of artistic expression? I believe it will be so, but I leave that to the future. That is, if AI has not taken over the planet by then.

³¹ For example, for the sake of time, leaving quite well alone something like Kant's esthetic ideas about disinterested judgment.

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Chapter 8

On the Narrative and Moral Functions of Fictitious Portraits in E.A. Poe's "The Oval Portrait", M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier

Abstract

This chapter investigates the functions of portraits in narrative texts and argues that their use helps authors to comment on their characters and that portraits can play an important role for whole plots. The relations between painting and writing are complex and multidirectional and involve questions of style, genre and realism. In reference to A.S. Byatt's essay *Portraits in Fiction*, this contribution suggests that a differentiation between "literary portraits", "portraits in literature" and "fictitious portraits" will prove helpful for future discussions of the interrelations between art and literature. The analysis is concerned with portraits that have been invented solely as part of a fictitious text and do not exist outside the narrative. The chapter argues that the invention of "a portrait in words within a text" can prolong and intensify the sensations of the readers. The analysis discusses how writers use fictitious portraits to explore the interrelations between the visible and the invisible, and especially the tensions between visuality and morality. By focusing on three canonical examples—Poe's "The Oval Portrait", Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—the chapter also illustrates the significance of gender issues in nineteenth-century fiction. While Poe's story creates the example of a passive female sitter in the tradition of the Gothic novel, Braddon's sensation novel presents an active female criminal whose wickedness is revealed by her portrait. Wilde combines Braddon's idea of the revelatory powers of a portrait with Poe's idea of the vampiristic qualities of painting.

Keywords: Wilde, Braddon, Poe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, art and literature, portrait, literary portrait, fictitious portrait, narrative painting, gothic, sensation, Dorian Gray, Lady Audley, The Oval Portrait

1. Introduction

“Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*”. Victor Shklovsky has famously argued in his essay “Art as Technique” ([1], Shklovsky’s italics). He continuously links the purpose of art to his idea of “the sensation of life”: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known” [1]. The famous British novelist Julian Barnes ascribes similar functions to art: “Art does not just capture and convey the excitement, the thrill of life. Sometimes, it does even more: it *is* that thrill.” ([2], Barnes’s italics). I would like to suggest not only that these ideas refer to painting but also that they can be transferred onto fiction as well, especially sensation fiction with its strong intermedial features [3].

This contribution argues that various Victorian forms of art, such as narrative painting or sensation fiction, should be investigated in the light of Shklovsky’s or Barnes’s maxims, since they help the viewer or reader reach a more immediate or acute feeling of being alive through the reception of a specific painting or text. Narrative paintings and sensation novels, for instance, at the same time represent and defamiliarize ordinary reality. Events are not solely presented as purposeful or logically ordered; the topics of such paintings or the plot lines in such novels can also be strange and full of symbolism and surprises. Both media feature strong emotional moments that recipients were familiar with through melodrama—a theatrical genre that itself combines visual and textual art more explicitly than drama in general, especially with regard to the theatrical practice to “freeze” the action in the form of a *tableau vivant*.

When examining examples of art or literature, one must place the art form within the social circumstances of the particular time during which the work was produced. The nineteenth century saw dramatic changes and influential inventions and also the emergence of discourses or topics that we continue to discuss today. In addition to the ongoing rise of the middle class and the weakening of the nobility, the growing importance of mass media and fast transport options as well as new quick forms of communication *via* telegraph or telephone continue well into our time. In the course of these changes and innovations, important art collections as well as institutions and colleges were created that were dedicated to imparting knowledge and skills in the fields of art or literature.

The emergence of psychoanalysis as a recognized science and its influence on the understanding and definition of illness and madness can hardly be overestimated. Ideas about criminology and ethnology are being developed, and with regard to the ethical problems that people were confronted with in the nineteenth century, rethinking them in the wake of new scientific findings plays a major role. It is certainly difficult for us to measure how strongly the ideas postulated by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer have shaken people’s ideas and continue to shake them, especially in the USA. Not only is the idea of man as the crown of divine creation gradually lost, but in particular the supremacy of men as role models and leaders for women and children is becoming questionable. Gender roles are negotiated prominently in all social areas, and these negotiations also find expression in painting and literature, especially in narrative paintings and sensation novels.

Many studies of gender roles in the nineteenth century still maintain that men and women lived in separate spheres, men in a public and women in a private sphere. The most famous Victorian gender stereotype—that of the “angel in the house”—still has great influence today on the stipulation that only men had a public identity in the nineteenth century. Coventry Patmore’s series of poems of the same name paints

the picture of an ideal Christian wife and mother who is the perfect helpmate to her husband. Not only did Patmore's poems provide the expression that would become a stereotype but they also initiated an ongoing exploration of gender identity. In visual terms, this feminine ideal implied a classical beauty and a harmonious physical form as well as symmetrical shapes and features. Long hair, preferably blonde curls and a slim waist were equally important and closely linked to fashionable hairstyles and clothes. In consequence, we find that painters and writers often concentrate on elaborate hairstyles or fashions.

Victorian women faced many contradictions regarding their social value and functions, which made aesthetic and ethical self-fashioning a complex process. While, on the one hand, the corset was seen as necessary to support the "weaker vessels", on the other hand, women were supposed to act as domestic angels and at the same time offer spiritual and emotional support to their families. John Stuart Mill argued in his treatise *On the Subjection of Women* in 1869 that men were not only exploiting women as a workforce but also expecting them to invest emotions into their social relations at all time [4]. This prominent expectation takes centre stage in many Victorian narratives in painting and writing. The narrative painting *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood* by George Elgar Hicks (1863), now in the Tate Britain, is a good example of this Victorian ideal, depicting a woman comforting her distraught husband in front of the living-room fireplace.

The most influential art critic in the nineteenth century was John Ruskin, who argued that paintings should be "poetical", that is, that the painters should not only rely on famous texts or historical events but become "poets" themselves and invent and "write" their own stories while painting them [5]. Thus, Ruskin makes the connection between painting and writing, between picture and text explicit. Julia Thomas suggests the term "narrative paintings" for such "story-telling" paintings, however, because Ruskin's idea of paintings as "poetic" is misleading and ignores the close relation to the narrative form: "prose-painters" would be a more fitting term, she explains [5].

Moreover, Thomas persuasively argues that "the very act of seeing is itself a type of reading". She states that some narrative painters even saw themselves as authors. With the help of William Holman Hunt's famous and influential painting *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), Thomas explains the ways in which a narrative painting can be "read". Not only symbols are being used, but also the painting might even include texts, such as lines on music sheets on the piano and the floor in the case of Holman Hunt's painting [5]. In consequence, one can state that intermedial relations between image and text can work both ways in art and literature.

2. Literary portraits, portraits in literature, fictitious portraits in literature and the question of morality

The most common usage of the term "literary portrait" refers to existing paintings or photographs of literary writers. Museums such as the National Portrait Galleries in London and Washington, D.C., are institutions where such portraits in paint or as photographs are on display. For a literary portrait to be chosen for display in such eminent institutions, the writer generally has to have achieved a notable historical prominence, general popularity or even social notoriety. Examples are *Charles Dickens* (1859) by William Powell Frith, which is held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, or *Sylvia Plath* (2001) by Chechu Álava, which is on display in the

Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum in Madrid. As the last example indicates, such literary portraits do not have to stem from the time when the writer was alive.

However, the term “literary portrait” can also refer to literary texts that “portrait” a well-known historical person, who might be/have been a writer or not. In journalism, the expression is commonly used in reference either to reviews of the latest biographies written about well-known personalities (that perhaps wish to “paint a new picture” of this celebrity) or to novels that have been inspired by the lives of such personalities. The fictionalized biographies often do not even claim to be historically correct in every detail, but take poetic licenses, for instance, in order to shed light upon a mystery in someone’s life in the past. In literary studies, a “literary portrait” is a very basic concept that can refer to a lengthy as well as to a fairly short introduction of a new character whose features or peculiarities are being described in the context of a much longer narrative. Accordingly, the use of the term “literary portrait” in journalism does not have to be connected to painting, and in literature introductions of characters usually make no connection to painting at all—so it is noteworthy when they do.

In her essay *Portraits in Fiction*, A.S. Byatt differentiates between “portraits in paint” and “portraits in words” [6]. While the expression “portraits in paint” seems to refer to existing paintings and “portraits in words” to “literary portraits” in text form, the essay makes clear that “portraits in words” can also include “portraits in paint”, since paintings can have a great variety of forms and functions within a narrative. Byatt’s discussion makes clear that the relations between painting and writing are complex and multidirectional and that they also involve questions of realism. For example, she mentions Robert Browning’s poem on the painter “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855) in her discussion of the relationship between painting and fiction and explains how in Browning’s dramatic monolog the painting friar is being “reproached by his churchly masters for lack of idealism, precisely because his characters are drawn from life” [6].

I would suggest that the limited space of a canvas reduces the possibilities and freedom of representation that a painter has and that generally painting is more closely interlinked with materialism and the material world. Byatt also attributes a greater scope of expression to a “portrait in words” and mentions that in writing a description of a character can be “deliberately [...] fluctuating and vague” and that “a good novel exploits the richness of the imprecision, of the hinted” [6]. In contrast to portraits by painters or photographers that are primarily concerned with the prominence of the painter or questions of likeness and style, verisimilitude or authenticity, portraits in literature are linked to a multitude of questions on various textual levels, depending on the features of the character they are linked to, their specific functions within the narrative and the desired effects of their uses on the reader.

Interestingly, Byatt mainly discusses references in texts to existing portraits and historical persons, that is, famous painters and famous writers connected to famous painters. In consequence, the “portraits in words” that Byatt focuses on always have close connections to “portraits in paint.” One example she gives is Henry James’s use of Bronzino’s portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). On the one hand, the painting is used to make the outer appearance of James’s heroine Milly Theale more explicit by way of comparison. On the other hand, since Milly has learned that she is mortally ill, James uses Milly’s perception of the painting as a means to give expression to her inner state of mind. Milly associates the sitter with mortality and reads the sitter’s expression as an indication of the absence of joy [6]. James’s use of Bronzino’s portrait is only one of many examples of the comparison of a fictitious character with a really existing famous portrait.

In contrast to Byatt's essay, this contribution focuses on fictitious portraits, on portraits that have no direct connection to history or reality, but that have been invented as part of a fictitious narrative. Although the writers pretend that these portraits are "portraits in paint", they actually are solely "portraits in words", because they do not exist outside the narrative. It will become clear that such fictitious portraits are often used to bring into the foreground inner states or secret thoughts of a character. They might occasionally also be used to illustrate relations between characters, when their use is linked to, for instance, a misunderstanding or erotic tensions. The fictitious portraits which this contribution is focusing on illustrate the wide scope of linguistic representations in connection to visual arts. Especially their connectedness to discourses that were seen as transgressive or even immoral in the nineteenth century indicates that fictitious linguistic portraits were a welcome means for writers to include subversive subject matter that was not readily open to visual representation.

The aforementioned establishment and growing influence of psychoanalysis and the discussion of illnesses and madness are also reflected in narratives in connection to painting. Authors as well as painters are fascinated by transitional states of consciousness and mixed feelings and tensions between reality and fantasy. I have suggested elsewhere that we can speak of an "Aesthetics of Greyness" for the greater part of the nineteenth century, because the aesthetic vision gradually moves away from stark contrasts in terms of mood and color: from clear contrasts between night and day to times of transition like twilight, dusk, and dawn, from clear contrasts between black and white to shades of grey [7].

The "Aesthetics of Greyness" that I have postulated for art and literature in the nineteenth century can also be transferred onto ethical questions and the negotiation of them. In order to discuss whether some action could be described as "evil", Matthew Henry Kramer's theory of evil proves helpful. He defines three states of mind—heartlessness, extreme recklessness, and sadistic malice—in which wrong deeds are being performed, but for these actions to be termed "evil" they have to cause "severe harm in the absence of any significant extenuating circumstances" [8]. Kramer's theory is so persuasive because it focuses on actions based in the real world and on questions how to systematically connect them to moral ideas and intentions. I suggest that his theory can also be used to discuss the actions of literary characters in general and the connections between evil and the functions of "portraits in words" in particular.

In contrast to Kramer's understanding, many ideas of evil are of an imaginary nature, rooted in religion or fantasy. Evil ghosts or spirits are usually invisible, or a special meaning is ascribed to their occasional visibility. The connection between evil and visibility that Karen Gloy suggests is interesting for a discussion of morality in connection to painting. Gloy gives examples of "the evil eye" and argues that there are two different types of it to be found in different cultural traditions: a piercing look full of anger and wishes for revenge and a "Nachzehrer", the look of the dead person onto the living, which might be accusatory or absorbing. The former is the reason for the cultural practice of blindfolding people for their execution, she explains, while the latter is linked to the practice of closing the eyelids of corpses [9].

Both theories of evil can prove helpful for a discussion of ethical questions in the context of painting and literature and especially with regard to how fictitious relationships between active painters and passive sitters are being constructed in narrative texts. I wish to show that fictitious portraits can be used to explore the tensions between visibility and evil and offer a great variety of possibilities for writers to discuss issues of morality.

3. Vampiristic art: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

In her discussion of portraits in fiction, Byatt mentions Honoré de Balzac's short story "Le chef d'œuvre inconnu" (1831), in which a fictitious painter called Frenhofer compares himself to Pygmalion, because he sees himself as someone who installs life into his painted mistress. She connects Frenhofer to the "grotesque and sinister" characters in the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann and explains that Frenhofer's "activities are a sensuous attack on the painted body" and that Balzac thus "turns his painter's face into a paintbrush animated by desire" [6].

Edgar Allan Poe as well as Balzac seem to have been strongly influenced by Hoffmann's short story "The Jesuit's Church in G--" (original title "Die Jesuitenkirche in G--"), first published in 1816. The story was clearly inspired by Hoffmann's own assistance to a painter in the Jesuitenkirche in Glogau (today Głogów) in Prussian Silesia in 1796. The polymath Hoffmann, one of the most important and influential German authors of all time, worked as a jurist-council, theatre manager and music director while writing stories and novels, instrumental music and operas. He was especially interested in the relations and interconnections between art forms and also inspired Sigmund Freud's essay *The Uncanny*.

In Hoffmann's story, the I-narrator meets a mysterious German painter, called Berthold, who is painting at nighttime in the Jesuit's Church, although he is "abstemious" and has a weak constitution. Due to the setting at night, the term "nocturne" has been adopted from music for the description of such stories. Berthold compares himself to Prometheus and sees himself as "condemned to fearful, endless torment, without redemption". The I-narrator is impressed with Berthold's painting—"in the style of Rafaele, simple and heavenly sublimity"—and wonders why he is "scoffing at the limited nature of every human effort": "I was inspecting the depth of a mind that had received its death-wound" [10]. As Thomas explains, the image of "the withdrawn and emotionally fragile artist" became a popular stereotype in the course of the nineteenth century [5].

The I-narrator's acquaintance, a professor at the Jesuit's college, provides him with the manuscript of a former student, which gives insights into Berthold's past. Berthold was once married to an Italian princess, called Angiola T--, who he rescued from a life-threatening situation during the revolution at the end of the Neapolitan Republic. Angiola is described as "exquisitely beautiful" and "superterrestrial", but during his attempts to paint Angiola Berthold gradually transforms her from a "creature of celestial loveliness" into "a mere wax image on the canvas, staring at him with glassy eyes" [10]. This description reminds of the potentially evil eyes of a corpse whose stare can be interpreted as accusatory [9].

In consequence of his anger and frustration, Berthold curses his wife and their son and actually wishes them dead. Angiola's health deteriorates because of her unrequited love and his cruelty and her face becomes "corpse-like". The neighbors report his domestic abuse to the authorities, but he and his family have vanished when they arrive. Later, Berthold "cheerfully" returns to Germany alone, after he "had got rid of this wife and child". Convinced by the manuscript that Berthold is "the reckless murderer of his innocent wife and child", the I-narrator confronts Berthold who claims that his hands "are unstained by the blood" of his wife and son, but who later commits suicide after he has finished the church painting [10].

Given the popularity of the Pygmalion myth ever since it was established in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the eighth century [11], we generally associate the (male) artist with the mythical power of bestowing life. With the help of a muse (e.g. Venus), life (or

even a soul—*anima*) is being instilled into an inanimate (lifeless or soulless) (female) body. In Hoffmann's nocturne and Poe's story "The Oval Portrait" (1842), however, the artists are associated with murder and can be regarded as vampires that suck the vital energies out of their female models. They lead a ghoulish existence and can be more easily compared to Prometheus than to Pygmalion [11].

In contrast to Hoffmann's short story of 30 pages, Poe's short story "The Oval Portrait" is very short, even in comparison to the length of his own other short stories. It thereby reminds itself of the often cabinet-sized canvasses of Victorian narrative painters [5]. The I-narrator of Poe's story introduces the portrait that stands at the centre of the story by saying that it was "done in what is technically termed a *vignette* manner" ([12], Poe's italics). Poe later even repeats the reference to *vignetting* and thus stresses the interconnections between painting and writing and draws the reader's attention to the intermedial qualities of his story, since a "vignette" is a design originally used in book printing.

Poe's I-narrator finds himself injured in a Gothic castle in the Apennines—Poe even makes the connection to the literary genre himself by mentioning the famous Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe—and comes across a painting of a beautiful young woman of "immortal beauty" [12]. When he describes the painting, he compares it to portraits by "Sully"—meaning the famous Philadelphia portraitist Thomas Sully (1783–1872), whose nephew Poe was friends with [13]. The *Encyclopedia Virginia* features a painting of Poe's foster mother Frances Allan, which has been attributed to this friend, the painter Robert Matthew Sully (1803–1855), and includes the comment: "the painting appears to be based on an earlier work made about 1804 by his uncle" [14]—thus opening up room for speculations on the relations between this portrait and Poe's story.

Interestingly, by focusing his attention on the portrait in the room he stays in, the I-narrator seems to forget about his injury, and perhaps even a process of healing is initiated. In consequence, I would link the portrait's effect on the I-narrator to "the thrill of life" which Barnes attributes to art. Poe clearly places the I-narrator's processes of perception of art at the centre of his story. A small brochure on the I-narrator's bed provides him with background knowledge on the painting, and the text from the brochure is included and makes up the last third of the short story. Accordingly, a substantial part of the story is provided by "a text within a text"—in this case by "a portrait in words within a text."

The brochure relates the story of the portrait of the young woman who was married to the painter and only reluctantly sat for him, because she hated his art that she saw as her rival in her husband's attentions. Similar to the degeneration of Hoffmann's Princess Angiola, the beautiful sitter's health steadily declines during the process of painting. Whereas Berthold is infuriated by his inability to transport his wife's beauty onto the canvas, Poe's Sully-style painter becomes immersed in his artistry and is successful in achieving a life-like representation of the extraordinary beauty of his wife. What he does not realize is that he virtually drains the color from the cheeks of his reluctant sitter [12].

The story ends with the statement that the sitter is found dead the moment right after the portrait's completion. Poe gives no indication that the painter intentionally "murders" his wife; nevertheless, the production of the painting—through supernatural powers—results in severe harm, and the act of painting as well as the finished portrait thus acquire an evil quality. Although there is no sadistic malice involved in this story, the artist's state of being completely immersed in the process of painting and oblivious of his wife's loss of health reminds of two of the states of mind which Kramer connects to evil—extreme recklessness and heartlessness.

4. Revelatory art: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

Numerous Victorian novels boast heroines who perfectly master the complex social codes of women's public behavior, which serves, among other things, to conceal unwanted individuality. The marriage market required young women to display received feminine ideals, usually stereotypical female accomplishments like letter-writing or playing the piano, which we also see represented in paintings. Textual representations illustrate how young women acquired a repertoire of visual and linguistic signs and were trained to become actresses in the Victorian social theatre—which again links visual and textual art forms. But even more important than learning what they had to show was learning what they had to conceal. In consequence, some Victorian authors negotiate the psychology of vision by questioning the relationship between the visible and the invisible. Nineteenth-century stories contain numerous examples of young female characters who demonstrate refinements but hide knowledge and experience in order to shield their reputation or to secure their financial advancement.

Like other Victorian novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* from 1862 [15] features a fascinating female heroine who at first glance seems like an "angel". But while the appearance of such heroines corresponds to the Victorian ideal, their characters have so many negative features that we have to speak of "villainesses" instead of "heroines". The villainesses of these texts are beautiful, charming and attractive as well as dangerous, and above all their "sexiness" increases their dangerousness: "Too much sex begets murder", as Winifred Hughes puts it [16]. While Poe's story creates an example of a passive female sitter as a victim in the tradition of the Gothic novel, Braddon's sensation novel provides us with a heroine who becomes active as a criminal herself.

Sensation novels thrive on the fact that female characters can assume a new identity and give the impression of virginal girlhood, even if they have already been married. Criteria that the sociologist Paul Ekman defined as static for display rules, such as age or gender [17], are presented as changeable by Braddon. For both inner disposition and outer appearance, all characteristics that are understood to be angelic, innocent and moral must be brought to the fore, while all characteristics that could damage such an impression must be obscured. Kate Flint has postulated for photography a "potential for aesthetic manipulation" [18], a potential which can be found in Braddon's sensation novels, but which realist painting cannot adopt to a similarly large extent.

In my view, the construction of criminal heroines in sensation novels is an extreme version and reversal of the Victorian process of moral transgression and aesthetic sublimation: the grotesque outer aspects of human existence require no sublimation because aesthetic perfection is already present from the start. Instead of achieving moral purification through aesthetic refinement, perfect physical beauty is used for amoral purposes [7]. In narrative paintings, the amorality of the sitter is made obvious either by a certain style of painting which foregrounds the erotic qualities of the model or with the help of symbols that indicate that the sitter is a kept mistress or prostitute.

By arousing sympathy for a "fallen woman", for instance, Victorian narrative paintings aimed at moral as well as aesthetic effects. Such a painting cannot "be taken in at a glance", but has to "be read", Thomas argues [5]. What is so fascinating about Braddon's novel in the context of this investigation is the fact that a painted portrait is being used in the narrative to convey Lucy Audley's amoral purposes to the reader and thereby acquires a revelatory function.

The young female villainesses in sensation novels face the problem that the position of the ideal wife and mother, which should not be a life full of action outside the home, can only be achieved through an active life full of cunning and intrigue, that they have to be “unfeminine” in order to become “feminine” and able to sublimate their “moral unfitness” [7]. For their intrigues or crimes, they make use of new fast forms of transport by train or communication by telegraph, for instance, to create an alibi. Two of the most popular sensational techniques in these active lives are bigamy and the return of the dead to life. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, we even find two characters who are thought to be dead but return alive: Lucy Audley is Helen Talboys, who is supposed to have died, and her first husband, George Talboys, turns out to be still alive at the end of the novel. One interesting aspect is that Lucy Audley can assume a dual identity and commit bigamy by taking the post of a governess. Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble have convincingly argued that “governess” is the ideal social position for a villainess because she is an outsider who becomes established in the family and, as a servant, carries the potential for intrigue and disruption [19]. Amoral governesses in Victorian fiction can be described in Darwin's words as “monstrosities under domestication” [7].

The novel initially focuses on the visible aspects of Lucy Audley's personality and only gradually reveals the invisible aspects, all the secrets she must conceal. In contrast to a painting, a novel has greater scope to bring about such a gradual change in the perception of the readers and to continuously provide revelations. A novel can more easily fulfil Shklovsky artistic ideal, that is, “to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” [1]. One strategy that narrative painters adopted in order to bring about a similarly gradual process of revelation was to produce a series of paintings. A famous example of this is Augustus Leopold Egg's triptych *Past and Present* (1858). The subject of the paintings—the discovery and the consequences of a wife's adultery—was seen as “unsavoury” and “unsuitable for public displays” [5]. This reaction illustrates that the public was held in a tension between sympathy and abjection with regard to the representation of Otherness in the nineteenth century [7]. The fact that the painting could not be sold during the artist's life indicates that it is probably also easier to control public access to a painting than to a novel.

The 27-year-old nephew of Sir Michael Audley, Robert Audley, is strongly fascinated by his young aunt and even confesses that he is falling in love with her. In consequence, Robert's efforts to prove that his aunt is a murderer and bigamist can at least partly be explained by his infatuation with her and envy of his uncle. In his search for clues at the country house Audley Court in order to prove his suspicions are true, he comes across a freshly painted portrait of Lucy Audley in her room. Braddon uses the portrait to make Lucy's hidden sexual experiences from her first marriage clear to the reader. The portrait is shown to have the power to not only represent a moment in the presence but also reveal secrets from the past.

What is especially noteworthy is that Braddon presents the portrait to the reader from the perspective of male desire:

No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blond complexion and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait [15].

With Barnes, one can argue that for Robert Audley Lucy's portrait "is the thrill of life": "Reading" it slowly provides him with strong sensations and the perception of a moment of intimacy with his aunt which he craves. In Shklovsky's words, the portrait of Lucy clearly shows her as she is "perceived", not as she is "known". What the characters could not see before—Lucy Audley's invisible features—has been made visible by the painter of her portrait, at least to the male gaze. In the portrait, she shows bright light as well as eerie light, "shadows" as well as "shimmer". The mixed facial features have strong moral connotation: they are both "wicked" and "delicate". Important is the fact that Braddon herself points to the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, who were famous for portraying their mistresses and the subject of the "fallen woman" [5].

Chris Willis has suggested that the portrait described bears a striking resemblance to Edward Burne-Jones's painting *Sidonia von Bork*. Burne-Jones used Dante Gabriel Rossetti's lover Fanny Cornforth (aka Sarah Cox) as a model, which might have enhanced the portrait's sensual qualities [20]. Since the Victorian construction of ideal femininity relies so heavily on the visible, and especially on beauty, it is tempting and may even seem logical for the viewer to infer from the visible to the invisible. Oscar Wilde also uses this misconception for the reactions to Dorian's beauty in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Similar to Braddon, Wilde uses Dorian's portrait to exploit the idea that ideal beauty is linked to goodness, an ideal which is based on Plato's concept of *kalokagathia*, the beauty-and-goodness [7].

Towards the end of the novel, Lucy Audley would like to adopt a new identity once again and re-enter genteel society, but the narrative cannot allow that because her transgressions are seen as too serious. Her criminal actions—although they repeatedly are unsuccessful in causing the severe harm she intends—are full of heartlessness, extreme recklessness and occasionally even sadistic malice and clearly turn her into an evil protagonist. Interestingly, a fictitious portrait is rendered the narrative function of evidence for her wickedness. Finally, society has to hide her criminal energy behind the thick walls of an asylum under the official verdict of "madness", just as a curtain is finally hung in front of the Pre-Raphaelite portrait at Audley Court.

5. Camouflaging art: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The three most important characters in Wilde's novel are male and form what I suggest calling "an unholy trinity" of patron, artist and muse. Two middle-aged characters, the art lover Lord Henry Wotton and the painter Basil Hallward, explore and transgress the limits of morality with their admiration for the title hero's youth and beauty. In consequence, the homoerotic tendencies in the relationships between the male characters and their relations to art stand at the centre of the narrative. The art patron Lord Henry can be seen as the main authority in Dorian's moral corruption, but the portrait that the painter Basil Hallward produces of Dorian can also be interpreted as an expression of too great a devotion to the young man's beauty. Basil explains why he cannot exhibit the painting:

The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul [21].

While the portrait of Lucy Audley has revelatory powers with regard to the hidden features of the sitter and the male desires of the onlooker, the portrait of Dorian Gray has the power to reveal hidden desires of the painter. With Byung-Chul Han's theory on beauty one can even describe the portrait as "an object for culinary pleasure" for Basil—this is the reason why he cannot put it on display. Since, according to Immanuel Kant, the pleasure felt in perceiving beauty should be disinterested, Han suggests that "aesthetic intuition is not consumptive but contemplative". Instead of forgetting himself in the process of painting, Basil's zest for culinary pleasure robs the painting of its timeless qualities: "Consumption and duration exclude each other", Han argues [22]. "The thrill of life" that the painting can give is too closely interlinked with sexual pleasures, and in consequence the painting must be kept secret, away from public view in order to hide the excessive transgressive desire of the painter. The painter's strategy of secrecy initiates the processes of camouflage that become the portrait's destiny.

The sitter's reaction when he sees his portrait for the first time is unusual and surprising. Dorian is not happy about the portrait, as expected, but rather envies it. One could say that he only becomes aware of his beauty through the portrait. At the same time he is already transforming, because the knowledge of his beauty changes his perception and shifts his priorities. In particular, an enormous change takes place within him in relation to his attitude toward his own youth. Thus, surprisingly early in the novel, the further course of the plot is foreshadowed and the alternative "art or life" is introduced as a fundamental decision for Dorian. However, the painter Basil does not attribute the change in Dorian's attitude to his portrait, but to Lord Henry's influence. Nevertheless, the image immediately takes on a life of its own, as it has the power to bring about changes in the viewer and endanger friendships.

Dorian's wish that the portrait should age in his stead is granted; the reader never learns by what power. The transfer of the ageing process from a human being onto the work of art introduces a supernatural element into the novel and starts Dorian's engagement in using the portrait for camouflage. The pact triggers two unnatural processes: the hero retains his youthful appearance so that later in the story, at almost 40 years old, he still looks like he did when he was about 20 years old. At the same time, the portrait takes over the representation of the ageing and decay process. Dorian will eventually be correct in his suspicion that the portrait will one day mock him, but this will happen in a different way than he initially assumes.

Precisely because a painting can retain its beauty, Dorian sees it as an enemy with its own power. In a way, it is true that a painting starts a life of its own once it is declared finished, especially if it is put on display in public. Dorian claims for himself the privilege that only works of art are characterized by: not ageing. In the narrower sense, works of art also fall into disrepair and need to be restored. In a figurative sense and over longer periods of time, however, what we call "great art" is characterized by its timelessness. For hundreds of years, we have been puzzling over the mysterious smile of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or the identity of Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with the Pearl Earring*. Great art appears like a miracle made by humans: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's or Franz Schubert's works defy all attempts to explain what a human being can realistically achieve in a relatively short life. Accordingly, it is understandable when authors like Poe or Wilde connect art with supernatural powers.

I would argue that "dying for art" represents "the normal case": the human body tends to be in a process of decay, and people have to die sooner or later. The belief that one can escape it, hand it over to an "ersatz penitent", or turn it off with magic potions still has the character of a psychosis a hundred years after the novel was published. It is no coincidence that the "Dorain Gray syndrome" is recognized as a pathological

disorder in psychoanalysis. This psychosis is expressed in rejection of one's own body and can be associated with eating disorders or a preference for cosmetic surgery.

This miracle of apparently not ageing is first exploited by Dorian as a "license to sin" and later even as a "license to kill". While the fictional secret agent James Bond has this license granted or revoked by his employer, Dorian lacks such a moral control authority. The painter Basil, who at the beginning of the novel wants to destroy his portrait so that it does not come between him, Dorian and Lord Henry, tries again to act as a controlling authority at the end of the novel but is again prevented from doing so by Dorian.

The portrait's ageing in a substitute function can be understood as a "mirror of the soul" as well as a "mirror of the body", because it not only shows the natural ageing process of Dorian but also illustrates his moral decline. The painter Basil notices this when he is shown the portrait of Dorian after many years. Even the artist's materials fall victim to the sitter's moral degeneration. Not only does the portrait show what Dorian would actually look like at this point in time, the unnatural process of 'transferred ageing' is even more profound, as the entire physicality of the portrait with canvas and paint is also affected. With its ability to change, the portrait simultaneously holds Dorian in its claws and ultimately destroys the life of the painter. When Basil realizes that the portrait is an expression of Dorian's true existence and a representation of his inner life, he calls on Dorian to pray together. Dorian then stabs Basil and blackmails a chemist he knows into disposing of the painter's body.

Whereas the portrait initially had to be kept secret because of its revelatory powers with regard to Basil's transgressive desires, it now needs to be hidden away due to its revelatory powers in reference to Dorian's moral and physical degeneration. Wilde thus combines Braddon's idea of the revelatory powers of a portrait with Poe's idea of the vampiristic qualities of painting. It is not the painter, however, who "feeds" on the sitter, but the sitter now devours the painting's beauty and kills the painter. As an "ersatz penitent", the painting makes Dorian's evil states of mind visible: heartlessness, extreme recklessness and sadistic malice, which cause severe harm. For Dorian, the portrait acquires the ghoulish powers of an "evil eye" of a dead person with an absorbing and accusatory look.

However, even after Basil's disappearance, Dorian's acquaintances do not suspect anything, as they infer his character from Dorian's beauty and do not believe him to be evil. Even Lord Henry, whom we can see as a kind of instigator, does not know the full extent of Dorian's depravity and has no idea of his vampiristic existence. Supernatural powers make it possible for Dorian to create a superficial image of the sublimation of his moral unfitness as long as the portrait exists [7]. With his exploration of Plato's ideal of *kalokagathia*, Wilde criticizes his contemporaries' ongoing belief in a connection between the appearance and the reality of goodness.

In his mistaken belief that he can erase the past by "murdering" the painting, Dorian stabs at the painting. Since Dorian has been living the shadowy existence of an undead since the moment of the devil's pact, feeding on the portrait like a vampire, the final death is a logical consequence that frees the undead from his existence in a kind of in-between world. When Dorian's servants enter the room, the portrait has regained its original shape. The servants can only identify their master's "worn, wrinkled, disgusting" body with the help of his rings [21]. Once more by supernatural powers, the devil's pact comes to an end and the portrait is no longer exploited for camouflaging purposes, but can start its independent existence for the disinterested contemplation of beauty.

Wilde did not call his novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, but rather *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The aim, I would suggest, was to differentiate between his text and the

fictitious portrait of the narrative and to state that in reality the novel itself is at least as remarkable a work of art with powers that defy explanation as the painting in the internal narrative is. In the end of the narrative, the transgressive painter and his evil muse have been destroyed. The process of camouflage—of holding the victimized portrait hostage—has come to an end, and the novel with its idea of the extraordinary powers of a fictitious portrait lives on.

6. Conclusion

This investigation has shown that the relations between painting and writing are complex and multidirectional and involve questions of style, genre and realism. Paintings in fiction can have a revelatory function and give insights into the inner states of mind and feeling of the artist, the sitter, or the onlooker. It has become clear that Byatt's differentiation between "portraits in paint" and "portraits in words" is a helpful one, but not sufficient for an in-depth analysis of all the potential narrative forms and functions which a portrait can have. As I could show, some authors add an extra textual level with "a portrait in words within a text" by inventing a fictitious portrait, which can take over various narrative functions and contribute to the richness of a plot line as well as to direct or indirect characterizations. In consequence, a differentiation between "literary portraits", "portraits in literature", and "fictitious portraits" can prove helpful for the future discussion of the interrelations between art and literature in general and of the functions of paintings in texts in particular.

Moreover, this chapter could illustrate how authors discuss gender roles with the help of the subject of portrait painting: they not only question received ideals about passivity, agency or gendered inspiration but also negotiate the relations between artist, sitter, and viewer and the moral issues linked to these relations. Fictitious portraits can prove beneficial for the authors' exploration of the interrelations between the visible and the invisible and the tensions between visuality and morality. With regard to the negotiation of morality in painting and writing, the subject matter of paintings and access to them can be more easily controlled, while fictitious representations are less restricted because they can be more complex or vague in their construction of meaning and use of genre codes, for instance of Gothic or fantasy literature.

While Poe's story creates the example of a passive female sitter as a victim in the tradition of the Gothic novel, Braddon's sensation novel presents an active female criminal whose wickedness is revealed by her portrait. The portrait of Dorian Gray has revelatory powers as well and therefore has to be hidden. Both artist and sitter engage in a strategy of camouflage to hide that they use art for culinary purposes—the former to conceal his transgressive sexual desires, the latter to keep his vampiristic exploitation of the portrait's beauty a secret.

By not only inventing the story but also "painting" a fictitious portrait with words, the writers enlarge their possibilities of representation and open up their texts to a greater scope of intermedial imaginary responses for their readers. The fictitious portraits in the texts discussed are central elements of the plot lines and assist their authors in the process of, in Shklovsky's words, "impart[ing] the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known" [1]. By using paintings within their narratives, Poe, Braddon, and Wilde complicate, prolong and enrich the readers' processes of reception and thus succeed in making the process of reading "an aesthetic end in itself".

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Remediating Stage Dramas for Cinema Audiences: Two Notable Case Studies

Mike Ingham

Abstract

The comparatively recent phenomenon of simulcast and captured live screenings of stage plays for mass audiences in the same country and overseas, is discussed in this essay in terms of its conceptual, aesthetic and pragmatic aspects, and also in terms of its actual and potential cultural and transcultural impact. My study explores similarities and differences in mediality, performance pragmatics and context between stage and screen reception modes, and analyses in detail two successful examples of stage-play broadcast to multiple remote audiences. The first is from the initial period prior to the disruption caused by the international COVID outbreak, while the second is a more recent production. I argue that such popular screen-to-stage transfers exemplify this new form of cultural consumption at its most aesthetically and semiotically effective. My aim is to show how hitherto distinct generic boundaries of literary work and literature in performance have been transgressed by recent technological innovations; I argue, moreover, that all such dramatic texts are essentially ‘literary’ according to more inclusive criteria.

Keywords: remediation, stage-to-screen transfer, National Theatre Live, semiotics, intermediality, literary art

1. Introduction

The National Theatre Live and Royal Shakespeare Company Live initiatives have launched a new era in digital theatre communication for cinema. Audiences and creative artists have witnessed a significant paradigm shift that has seen theatre performances opening up fresh markets *via* cinema distribution, deploying cinematic codes and modes of expression. The transcultural impact of broadcasting internationally is also noteworthy: initial international broadcast live and captured live screenings were generally restricted to North America, but increasingly both NT Live and RSC Live have extended their influence to other countries, especially those with closer ties to Britain’s Anglophone culture. Publicity material on the NT Live website announced that since their 2009 inception “NT Live has showcased more than 30 productions

at more than 1000 cinema venues in over 30 countries, featuring some of the biggest names from British film and theatre” [1].

Commonly dubbed ‘event cinema’, ([2], p. 93) theatre broadcast in cinema has become a highly commercial practice. It has attracted mass audiences to more culturally ‘highbrow’ theatrical events than would ever have been imagined prior to its inception when prospects for wooing younger, more diverse audiences were grim. As a consequence, the longer-term outlook for both commercial viability and artistic advancement in the theatrical arts appears brighter. The theatre-in-cinema industry was flourishing prior to the 2020 COVID shutdown of all public venues and has subsequently taken time to get back on its feet; however, the current signs are that it has regained its cultural momentum.

In the present essay, we will explore the cultural implications of this paradigm shift in theatrical production and reception. Susan Sontag, in her 1966 cultural essay, ‘Film and Theatre’, referencing these two similar but different dramatic forms, claimed that “what is important is that no definition or characterisation of theatre and cinema, even the most self-evident, be taken for granted” ([3], p. 182). Dovetailing with Sontag’s idea, the screened theatre productions of the new millennium offer a fascinating compound that integrates the expressive methods of both art forms. The transmission of live performances of stage dramas, as well as other niche theatre forms, particularly ballets and opera productions, has helped to reinvigorate the theatrical arts. Thus, my aim in the present essay is to show how the hybrid and intermedial nature of theatre-in-cinema vindicates Sontag’s insights regarding the liminal relationship and fluid interactions between the respective forms.

Naturally, the production values of these theatre broadcasts depend very much on the source stage production’s original codes, albeit in a transformed context of reception. Judging by the box-office success of a distribution practice that might have originally appeared difficult to market to typical cinema audiences, screened theatre, including speech dramas, operas, musicals and ballets, has more than justified the technological and cultural development that introduced them. Productions of hallowed literary texts, including Shakespeare and other classic dramas, have featured alongside works of literary fiction transposed to the stage, such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, to cite more recent examples.

This raises an important question relevant to both the present essay and other essays on the topic of literary cultural production: while drama has often been read purely as literature, it has usually been dependent on a concrete medium, namely theatre, for its ultimate mode of reception in the context of stage performance. Indeed, there is a longstanding debate whether drama, especially modern drama in performance, should be considered bona fide literature, or whether what Benjamin Bennett calls its “categorical disparities”¹ exclude it from the literary paradigm. Unlike other literary forms that are intended to be read, whether silently or aloud, drama requires, paradoxically, a non-literary institution, with which it is inextricably associated, for its full representation before an audience. Complicating the relationship between reader and author is the intervention of both the theatre director and stage actor, both

¹ In *Theatre as Problem: Modern Drama and Its Place in Literature* [Introduction, 1–16] Bennett comes down on the side of theatre as literature, but deals with the question as open to debate: “I assume [...] that what happens in the theatre, for all its unrepeatable physical particularity, is after all always a literary event, and precisely the radical tension, the categorical disparity, that thus arises, is a crucial structural feature of what we mean by literature to begin with” ([4], p. 16).

of whom encode their own interpretation of character, plot and textual meaning into the hermeneutical process. Inevitably, therefore, there is no such thing as a 'pure and original' dramatic text.

Thus, the key question for contemporary researchers, as well as drama and literary critics, is this: now that dramatic literature is further filtered through the medium of cinema for a mass remote audience, whether synchronously or asynchronously (*via* so-called 'encore screenings'), to what extent can it retain its former close association with literary practices? Put simply, when literary work is remediated in such a diffuse interaction, which would seem to limit the subjectivity of the audience's response, perhaps the aesthetic experience is closer to cinema consumption than it is to the response to dramatic literature.

The theoretical ramifications of the text-theatre relationship become even more complex when we consider the necessary intermediality between the institutions of theatre and cinema that comes into play in the process of broadcasting and distribution. Considered from a theoretical perspective, stage-screen intermediality can be defined as the interposing of the conventions and coding of one performance medium on the other. The respective signifying codes relating to stage design, perspective, framing, camera angles, shot duration and depth, spatial logic, continuity, framing and other performance phenomena are altered in the process. Stage and screen drama converge in a hybrid performance space, in which they are fused. Intermediality takes place in three related domains: textual/formal, ontological/interpersonal and conceptual/cognitive. It can also be associated with the cultural-anthropological notion of liminality since ambivalence and transitions between established boundaries and borders are common to both fields of study and practice. The liminal state of consciousness induced by the cinema screening of a stage performance is somewhat akin to the experience of an indeterminate transitional stage of social ritual.

A liminal state of consciousness regarding space is likewise evoked in Michel Foucault's essay 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias': "The heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other. Thus, on the rectangle of its stage, the theatre alternates as a series of places that are alien to each other; thus the cinema appears as a very curious rectangular hall, at the back of which a three-dimensional space is projected onto a two-dimensional screen" ([5], p. 335). Foucault's heterotopic model is particularly relevant to theatre remediated for cinema, not only for its dialectic between spatial continuity and discontinuity but also for its affordance of alternative ideological perspectives. The viewer is literally and metaphorically distanced from the immediate theatrical context; it resembles the act of the reader, who engages both cognitively and emotionally with the text, but does so in a less physically intimate, immediate context of reception than in live theatre.

The phenomenological and ontological properties of screen and stage are radically different, as Foucault's heterotypic distinctions make clear. While stage performances are determined by the physical presence of actors in the co-extensive performance space, screened drama is characterised by fleeting two-dimensional images of absent actors performing asynchronously. Chiel Kattenbelt wittily sums up this distinction: "Film provides the illusion of reality...whereas theatre provides the reality of illusion" ([6], p. 37). The aesthetics of both involve physical and verbal elements, but these aesthetics are mediated very differently in the vast majority of dramas originally conceived as film art. However, when one form (theatre) is remediated and integrated within the other (cinema), formerly clearcut aesthetic distinctions between the two become blurred by the formal hybridity of the compound.

This practice is evident in twenty-first century stage productions based on famous films, such as Patrick Barlow's 2009 *The Thirty-Nine Steps* [7, 8], and in films that simulate the rhythms and style of stage performance, such as Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* [9]. The use of long takes and stage-like settings and *mise-en-scène* in film and of electronic image projection, simulated film imagery, quasi-cross-cutting from one scene to the next, and non-diegetic soundtrack music in stage plays are commonly employed stylistic tropes today. In addition, the previous demarcation line between a film director and stage director has become increasingly blurred by directors of the calibre of Sam Mendes, Danny Boyle and Stephen Daldry, all of whose work spans theatre, cinema and television; sometimes the film production team is in-house, as is the case with RSC Live, while other theatre companies work hand-in-hand with specialist cross-media companies, such as Mendes's Neal Street Productions or James Bierman's Empire Street Productions.

Such theatre arts production companies are able to co-opt the apparatus of film for transcoding dramatic performances in cinema. They exercise full control over the quality of the production and, to a considerable extent, the reception of their live creative work in its movie-theatre afterlife, and are much less subject to the commercial priorities of producers than their cinema counterparts. So skilfully compounded are these mixed-mode productions that the cinema-goer may have the sudden impression of being seated among a live theatre audience, or, correspondingly, the theatre-goer might unconsciously anticipate a more revealing camera view of a character, momentarily forgetting that s/he is watching a live performance directly and not remotely. Outside the U.K., the United States and Canada, however, such "live" performances tend to be recorded and transmitted asynchronously for the global market. Typically, remediated productions are between 2 and 3 hours in duration, although screened performances feature commercial advertising and trailers for other non-theatre-based movies, creating a pre-performance ambience that has little in common with attending a stage play.

From the beginning, critical opinion on the theatre-in-cinema phenomenon has been divided, with some stage critics seeing it as a pale imitation of a live theatre performance, while others have expressed their approval; for example, *The Stage's* Mark Shenton in an art debate on broadcast-theatre published in the British newspaper *The Observer* saw it as a poor substitute for the real thing, and referred to the experience for audiences as merely "second best" [10]. On the other hand, the newspaper's own arts columnist Hermione Hoby, taking the pro side of the debate, saw it as an exciting cultural development and praised it for offering audiences "the best bits of the theatre magnified" [10].

Shakespeare's plays, unsurprisingly, have been major beneficiaries of these new theatre broadcast practices. As Susan Bennett has shown, published figures for the creative industries in the U.K. in 2014 ranked four Shakespeare stage productions, including the NT Live *Coriolanus* and the RSC Live *Richard II*, in the Top-Ten Event Cinema box-office successes ([11], p. 42). Lyndsey Turner's 2015 *Hamlet* production, was seen by an estimated 800,000 viewers worldwide ([11], p. 42) in initial and repeat screenings further testified to the public appetite for Shakespeare on screen, which has greatly benefited from the box-office pull of familiar stage and screen stars, such as Hiddleston (*Coriolanus*), Benedict Cumberbatch (*Hamlet*), Lily James (*Romeo and Juliet*) and David Tennant (*Richard II* and *Macbeth*).

One NT Live screening that exemplified how the effect of 'magnification' can work for a production was Josie Rourke's 2013 production of *Coriolanus* at the diminutive Donmar Warehouse in London, featuring Tom Hiddleston in the role of the ancient

Roman warrior. In its economic setting and intense psychological study, the play reflects disillusion with the petty intrigues and jealousies of the political sphere but also conveys scepticism towards the public phenomenon of the charismatic leader, which is clearly a theme that resonates with the troubled times we are experiencing in the early twenty-first century. Tim Van Someren's direction for the screen made the most of cinematic magnification techniques to render the overpowering stage presence of the protagonist.

My essay will propose, with reference to two performance examples—the above-mentioned theatre broadcast production of *Coriolanus* and a relatively new monodrama entitled *Prima Facie*—that even in electronically disseminated form, literary imagination and literary qualities inhere, and that remotely experienced live drama in cinema does not imply a consequent remoteness from the field of literary arts.

2. Two exemplary national theatre live productions

2.1 *Coriolanus* NT live, 2014

2.1.1 *Performances and characterisation*

Tom Hiddleston's stellar attractions as the eponymous anti-hero of the Donmar Warehouse's production of *Coriolanus*, transmitted in association with National Theatre Live, are evident to any viewer of the filmed version of the play. His screen, and likewise stage, presence is compelling, and it is clear from the outset that in some ways this is more of a star vehicle than an ensemble piece. In Donmar Artistic Director, Josie Rourke's energetic stage production, directed for the screen by Tim Van Someren, there are some powerful supporting performances. Mark Gatiss as the dryly pragmatic Menenius and Deborah Findlay as the protagonist's influential mother, Volumnia, add gravitas to the production. However, most of the publicity, for the screened production, is inevitably predicated on Hiddleston's intensity and charisma.

In many plays such intense focus on a single character, where the protagonist is almost larger than life, could be detrimental. *Coriolanus*, as a later Shakespearean tragedy, focuses less on the social context and more on the driven quality and uncompromising integrity of its subject. Charisma is a quality that is intricately bound up with the character of the play itself, to such an extent that its protagonist needs to physically and psychically dominate the action of the stage and the screen. Ralph Fiennes' portrayal of the role in his contemporary-set, graphically violent 2011 film adaptation emphasises this, and the gifted Hiddleston delivers a similarly high-octane and credible interpretation. The intensity of his stage performance imbues both stage and screen with his dramatic personality and presence, even though, as an accomplished stage actor, he tends to reach out to the character, rather than pulling the character to him, as celebrity screen actors may often do. His performance is one that exudes 'aura' both in theatrical and cinematic contexts and achieves an immediacy and urgency that has the effect of integrating stage and screen presences.

2.1.2 *Stage-screen interplay*

In terms of *mise-en-scène* the stage production benefits from the claustrophobic stage space and sharply rectangular configuration of the Donmar Warehouse, since the stage is delineated as an arena in which both verbal and physical combat are

momentous and determine victory or defeat. The entire cast is present on stage throughout the proceedings, not unusual for theatrical productions, but exceptional for filmed theatre. This has the effect of heightening the claustrophobia of the narrative and thus reinforcing the idea of the inescapable nature of both physical and political arenas in which the protagonist experiences such contrasting fortunes. Notwithstanding the obvious confinement of space, the former Covent Garden banana warehouse-turned-theatre is one of the smallest in the West End and contains only 251 seats—the screened version invests the acting arena with greater depth thanks to the variation and movement of the camera work, giving the viewer the illusion of virtually uninterrupted action. The camera's depth of field also enhances the impression that the non-participant actors sitting in a row at the back of the stage are more disembodied and phantasmagorical than they appear in the actual theatre space.

The attack on the city of Corioles in the opening part of the play is illustrative of this intensity and variable focus. Coriolanus's one-man assault that turns the siege into a triumph is conveyed by a single ladder for scaling the walls, together with martial stage lighting, sound effects and smoke. As a metonymic stage convention with which the sophisticated Donmar audience is broadly familiar, this kind of stage shorthand can seem feeble in the cinematic context. So, it is to the production team's credit, and also, of course, to Hiddleston's incandescent performance, that the screened version conveys the degree of heat, intensity and confusion of battle that it palpably does. Aesthetically meaningful close-ups on the protagonist, emphasising his multiple wounds, as he emerges from the bloody mist of the siege, and the memorable effect of the blood of being washed off by a stinging jet of water from above, enhance the feeling, not so much of literal, filmic realism of battle and its aftermath, as of a vicarious sensory experience. We feel his scars and the tenderness of the skin as the water comes into contact with it, even though both body and water are two-dimensional.

2.1.3 Camera and audience dynamics

At this point as the audience, we cannot but admire the prodigiously heroic feats of Coriolanus, even if his extreme savagery at the same time also repels us; both cinema and theatre audiences experience this concentrated ambivalence about the protagonist together, but for the cinema audience, the moment is mediated *via* judicious cinematic *mise-en-scène*, particularly the framing of the scene and of the protagonist and the skilful manipulation of the camera shots. The shot-lengths contribute to this effect of awed fascination with the spectacle of the bloodied, and bloody, Caius Marcius. Paradoxically, it is the intense stage realism of the actor here—as opposed to the realism of the scenic decor which one expects in a typical film version, such as in the Fiennes production—which renders this and many other aspects of the production so compelling for stage and cinema audiences alike.

The through-line of action, which maintains the focus on a Coriolanus whose tragic flaw is that he is physically, as much as cognitively, incapable of being 'false to his nature' (III ii, 15) compensates for an all-purpose supporting ensemble of citizenry and soldiery representing both Romans and Volscians that is undeniably more theatrical than cinematic [12]. The on-screen experience, being bound up so closely with the stage performance, is visceral whenever Hiddleston's Coriolanus, especially in tandem with his patrician supporter Menenius, his mother Volumnia and his nemesis and short-term ally Aufidius, is in the camera eye and thus the audience's eye. On the other hand, there is an inevitable lull in scenes that do not feature the protagonist, which serves to accentuate both the magnetism and the isolation of the tragic hero/

anti-hero. Coriolanus' blazing defiance of his political adversaries Brutus and Sicinia (a deliberate gender-switch anachronism on Rourke's part) in the celebrated speech beginning "You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate/...whose loves I prize/As the dead carcasses of unburied men/That do corrupt my air, I banish you!" [III.3.124-7] is another definitive moment that illustrates this total focus on the protagonist as his own antagonist.

Whilst the stage audience takes in the general aspect of this climactic scene from their vantage point of the real-life auditorium, the cinema audience hones in, by courtesy of the camera eye, on the particular. More clearly and closer up than the theatregoers, they perceive a magnificently isolated figure, whose 'world elsewhere' is already implied by the camera's figurative rejection of the society in his immediate environs, including the malevolent tribunes, the mob, and even his patrician supporters. The theatre and cinema audiences' consciousness in respect of such dramatic moments is, therefore, similar but different. To what extent, one supposes, have they seen the same play? But, of course, this type of speculation begs the question of to what extent have any two members of the same audience, whether in cinema or in theatre, seen the same play.

2.1.4 Political subtext and resonances

Equally, the NT Live production invites its vastly greater cinema audiences, as it does the relatively tiny theatre audiences, to reflect on the political implications of Shakespeare's last great tragedy for our own times. They are considerable since the play represents the ordinary people as a fickle and malleable mob, the politicians as smooth-tongued, self-serving manipulators of that mob, and the protagonist as a self-sufficient and brutally honest, but also arrogant and uncompromising, would-be strongman leader, all perennial types in the political world and certainly as relevant to contemporary times as when the work was written. Shakespeare's play reflects disillusion with the petty intrigues and jealousies of the political sphere but also conveys a certain scepticism in the charismatic leader, a theme that resonates with internationally relevant obsessions with celebrity and power. The citizens themselves reflect that to show ingratitude towards their martial hero would be the act of a monster, and their collective ingratitude would therefore "make a monster of the multitude" [II.3.10-11]. But Shakespeare's collocation, and alliteration, of these two words in the dialogue of the citizens—from whose mouths Coriolanus expects nothing good—ironically directs our thought towards the common people who make up the mass audience, whether in the past among the groundlings of The Globe, or of today's cinema audiences consisting of what Walter Benjamin and others would refer to as mass audiences.

The NT Live screening can communicate the cautionary political subtext of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as well as this production's contemporary message—reiterated by the director and her star actor in the pre-show documentary film about both the theatre venue and the play itself—to audiences that the Donmar itself could never dream of reaching out to. In the documentary introduction to the theatre, we are shown how at one time the Donmar previously was a warehouse serving the nearby Covent Garden Market. What we are not told, however, in this introductory documentary is that it was also briefly in the 1920s, most fittingly, a film studio. This production of *Coriolanus* following the first production that was broadcast live to multiple international screens from the Donmar, Derek Jacobi in the role of Lear (2011), exemplifies the reciprocal strengths of the cinematic and the theatrical in

the creation of dramatic characters in restricted and virtual performance space. As the production proves, it is in the mind's eye and ear of the stage and screen director, the actor and ultimately the audience that meaning is made and mediated.

Notwithstanding the obvious confinement of space—the former Covent Garden banana warehouse-turned-theatre is one of the smallest in the West End and contains only 251 seats—the screened version invests the acting arena with greater depth thanks to the variation and movement of the camera work, giving the viewer the illusion of virtually uninterrupted action. The camera's depth of field also enhances the impression that the non-participant actors sitting in a row at the back of the stage are more disembodied and phantasmagorical than they appear in the actual theatre space. Another aesthetic and phenomenological difference between this and other 'NT Live' relays is that the presence of the Donmar audience on screen is greatly curtailed, partly on account of the position of cameras and partly on account of other factors such as the lighting and the configuration of this particular theatre space.

2.2 *Prima facie*, Suzie Miller, NT live 2022

2.2.1 Legal-ethical scope of the drama

Former Australian barrister and current playwright Suzie Miller was not an internationally known dramatist until the success of her multi-award-winning dramatic monologue *Prima Facie*, a National Theatre stage production adapted to the screen by Empire Street Productions. The play originated in Miller's country of birth and earned plaudits there prior to the COVID-induced shutdown of live theatre and public cinema-going. Jodie Comer's one-woman tour de force performance, running between April and June 2022 at the Harold Pinter Theatre, resulted in the play becoming one of the most acclaimed simulcast and recorded live productions for NT Live of the post-COVID era.

Prima Facie is a play that deals with an urgent legal-ethical issue, namely the question of proving whether consent has been given, or not, in the private context of sexual intercourse. Miller's play is a subtle kind of activist theatre in that it invites audiences of both theatre and cinema performances to think deeply about the questions it poses, but does not answer, in respect of consensual sex. Nevertheless, the work advocates profound change in laws relating to how sexual assault is perceived and determined. Those changes have yet to be introduced in most legal systems, because the law itself, as Miller makes clear, remains inherently patriarchal in most countries. Using the time-honoured courtroom dramatic scenario *Prima Facie* (the term meaning literally 'at first sight' but being used in legal discourse to indicate that there is sufficient evidence on the face of it to proceed to trial) is a signal exception to other well-known examples of the theatrical sub-genre, such as the Reginald Rose classic *Twelve Angry Men* or Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution*.

2.2.2 Episodic and recursive narrative method

Constructed as an intimate narrative conveying the traumatic experience of rape and its legal ramifications, the play functions as a kind of mental reenactment in front of an audience; it conveys the stressful and initially humiliating experience of both the violation and the subsequent trial, at which we see the victim Tessa Ensler (Comer)—ironically an elite defence barrister herself—facing hostile interrogation by the accused's defence barrister. In a series of fast, episodic scenes that provide

background on her earlier career and the events leading to the rape trial, Tessa recounts her experiences *via* direct address; she embellishes the interactions with interlocutors and other significant personae in her story with indexical, rather than fully representational, role-plays. Dressed initially in a masculine-looking suit as she delivers ebullient eulogies on the machinery of law and her ambitions of attaining silk, i.e. elite barrister status, her rapid changes of costume throughout the play signify not only a greater feminisation and seeming vulnerability but a conscious abandonment of those acquired 'professional' values and aspirations. Thus, the important emotional support she receives from her mother is signified primarily by her growing attachment to the cheap pink polyester blouse her mother bought for her, which she wears when she gives evidence in court.

The narrative is non-linear and consists of numerous flashbacks about Tessa's life, family and career in a style suggestive of stream-of-consciousness confessional storytelling. She prefaces the present-moment, 'now' scenes of the play's intricate chronology with the discourse signpost, "This is me..."; inviting the audience to decode her verbal imagery to complement her use of non-verbal signifiers, including stage furniture and items of clothing. Similar in concept and structure to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's stage and screen hit *Fleabag*, although very different in tone, *Prima Facie* turns on the effective dramatic motif of reversal of fortune. Dramatic irony is to the fore, as the smart, aggressive defence lawyer of the first part of the play becomes the vulnerable sole witness for the prosecution in the play's second part. The life-changing movement that prompts this reversal is a night of drunken sex between Tessa and her chambers colleague, Julian; her working-class background and determination to succeed in the exclusive upper echelon of law are contrasted with the latter's privileged, elite-school education, wealthy social circle and easier route to the top. Held down and raped by him after she has vomited down the toilet and no longer wants to go through with their lovemaking, Tessa's flashback scenes serve to accentuate her psychologically convincing and recursively structured tale. This looping effect enhances the impression that Tessa has been enduring a constantly recurring nightmare, not only as a result of the rape itself but also of the 700 and 82 days wait for the trial to commence.

2.2.3 Semiotics of performance and key tropes

Miller begins the drama at breathtaking pace, using the evocative metaphor of horse-racing, evoking the scenario of defending and prosecuting barristers as 'thoroughbreds' at the starting-gate, primed for the race to come that only one of them can win. Tessa sees herself as a natural 'winner', which makes the reversal of her situation, from winner to 'loser', in the play's second half more palpable. Her initial bullish self-confidence and confidence in the law as an institution are transmitted through her dominant body language on stage, while the camera in Justin Martin's production keeps all eyes riveted on the star turn. The courtroom is evoked in a series of seamless frontal medium shots, but eschewing, in typical broadcast-theatre mode, any filmic close-ups or tight close-ups.

As with a theatre audience, we accept the semiotic convention whereby Tessa's office in chambers doubles as a criminal courtroom; we are effectively captivated by her presence, so that the electric energy her bewigged and robed body exudes is reproduced in the broadcast version by being directly addressed, as though specifically to camera. This tight focus on a single subject rivets our attention on Tessa, a kin-aesthetic that is derived from theatre and yet comes across as particularly cinematic.

The play's continuity devices, as in many contemporary stage productions, resemble film and television drama cutting techniques, thereby simplifying editing of the NT Live-stream and recorded performances.

Like the unsuspecting witness of the opening courtroom scene, who falls into Tessa's masterful cross-examination trap, our gaze, whether male or female, is drawn inexorably to her. The great irony is, of course, that by proclaiming her unquestioning faith in the intrinsic justice of the legal code and her belief that an objective 'truth' about the actions of the accused is not her business, Tessa, as the sexual assault witness of the second half, is unwittingly digging her own grave. Thus, for her to consider witness statements and prosecution and defence counsel summing-up as merely competing 'stories'—one of which may sound more plausible than the other but are both part and parcel of the intricate 'game' of law—relates closely to Miller's meta-narrative. The relative or absolute nature of truth is at issue.

At one point earlier in the play, seeking male-colleague approval for her supposedly impartial views on how the law operates, Tessa ridicules a former female colleague and trainee for wanting to know the truth regarding her client's sexual assault accusation. For this brash, workaholic Tessa establishing truth means 'walking an ethical tightrope', and she would rather not be burdened by ethical considerations. At another point, there is a second courtroom scene in which she cross-examines a witness who has suffered exactly the kind of sexual assault that will form the core of her own self-narrative. The witness's plight and reason for bringing the case—to protect other women—is an ironic prefigurement of Tessa's own situation later in the play. Rationalising the ethical implications of her job, she compares the process to fictional narration: "We each tell a story...Nothing else, just the storyteller, the voice piece" ([13], p. 35). Truth and 'legal truth', she argues, are not the same thing.

Another key trope of the play is the idea of one out of three students either not making it out of law college or not succeeding in their subsequent career; a young Tessa in this flashback scene assumes that the one-in-three will be her on account of her working-class, Liverpoolian background. In the play's adroit *volte face* this 'one of three' motif is recapitulated, as Tessa asserts the shocking statistic that one in every three women is sexually assaulted, echoing the earlier reference in a very different context: "Look to your left, look to your right...one of us." ([13], p. 95) More than anything *Prima Facie* involves both an ethical and emotional journey and a harsh learning curve for its protagonist. From being the legal establishment's articulate apologist in the play's first half, she becomes its articulate critic in her day in court as prime witness. Despite the judge's imposition of *voir dire* (ironically meaning 'to speak truth')—meaning that the jury is instructed to leave the court because Tessa wilfully transcends her subordinate position as witness and delivers a scathing indictment of a residually phallogocentric criminal justice system in the matter of rape—the truth, however, unpalatable, is ultimately aired to the court and attentive media representatives; "somehow, sometime, something has to change" ([13], p. 98).

2.2.4 Variations between stage and screen pragmatics

While the stage appears on the face of it to be a more natural platform for a solo performance such as *Prima Facie*, cinema broadcast and recording also provide an extremely apt medium through which to transmit the drama to multiple remote audiences; obviously, the magnification of the image is an advantage that applies to any synchronous or asynchronous transmission. In this case, though, it is especially felicitous, given that Tessa, as the solo performer, is the focal point more or less for

the entirety of the 2-hour-plus piece, and her dynamic presence on screen is the key semiotic element. To a great extent, the NT Live production in cinema approximates the theatrical experience of the play, and simulates the sensibilities and perception of the original audience, but not completely; when Tessa is at her weakest point immediately following the rape, the police interview and the bodily examination, the higher angle of the camera shots that follow her connote vulnerability and objectification, and enhance our sense of empathy with a protagonist that has come over as cocksure and much less likeable in the first part of the play. The variety of camera angles also accentuates the effect created by the stage design team, showing Tessa dwarfed by the legal case files on the shelves surrounding her and above her. These case files represent a flexible signifier of dramatic meaning—initially emblematic of Tessa’s professional status, but later connoting the weight of patriarchal tradition, and finally, illuminated one by one in the closing scene, a striking signifier of the vast numbers of women subjected to sexual assault.

So, the irony of the title gradually impinges on the viewer/listener’s consciousness: ‘on the face of it’, or ‘at first sight’, the law seeks to establish the truth and dispense justice; but only on the face of it. The appearance of even-handed justice in rape cases is more important than the actuality of justice, because, as Tessa observes in her witness statement to the predominantly male courtroom, “the law has been shaped by generations and generations of men” ([13], p. 94) and is not a level playing field, with the result that the woman victim is usually the one who is effectively on trial. As the camera pulls back during Tessa’s closing oratory, speaking truth to unheeding power, a perspective that is unavailable to theatre audiences is revealed: the theatre audience itself is brought into the frame by the roving camera, becoming a surrogate for the jury members who are not permitted by legal procedure to hear Tessa’s truth statement; the cinema audience observes how the theatre audience becomes an intrinsic element of the play’s coding, implicated, by extension, in its radical social critique.

3. Conclusion

Cinematically mediated theatre incontestably forms part of the current cultural landscape, and, like all forms of technological innovation involving mechanical reproduction, looks set to proliferate and develop. With reference to the phenomenology of film, Spencer Shaw stresses that “filmed space is a lived space, which is both distantly viewed and bodily implicated, a vision that is temporally measured yet disjunctively fragmented” ([14], p. 36). Theatre broadcast productions reflect Shaw’s perception of the intrinsic dichotomy of the film medium, although it should be acknowledged that the typical play trajectory is more continuous and much less fragmented than the structure and rhythms of purpose-made films.

Of course, audience members in the cinema cannot experience exactly the same performance event as those in the theatre. Nevertheless, their intellectual and emotional responses to the two-dimensional mediation of a three-dimensional performance are equally valid; naturally, they are somewhat different in view of the context. For one thing, cinema spectatorship is a more personal and private experience than the more participatory, shared experience of the theatrical event. The cinema audience is less likely to share participatory responses relayed to them indirectly than is the case with the immediate theatre-based audience. Consequently, their reception, it can be argued, is less influenced by this shared ethos of the theatre auditorium. Moreover, referring to Foucault’s heterotopic model discussed earlier, we may

conclude there is a doubly heterotopian quality about theatre broadcast in cinema: the audience experiences the performance in ‘a lived space’ but at a remove from the original space of creative endeavour.

As regards the relationship between theatre-in-cinema and literary source texts, this appears more tenuous. Literature and cinema traditionally have much less in common than literature and theatre, which are conventionally recognised as associated art forms. At the same time, the play mediated in the context of cinema remains a literary work; this is particularly the case with a Shakespeare play, such as *Coriolanus*. However, does such an exercise in literary classification encapsulate modern stage dramas such as *Prima Facie*? As is usually the case with exclusive categories and boundaries, we are faced with a conundrum: is Shakespeare ‘in’ and Suzie Miller ‘out’? Or are both plays accepted as literary art, but not their cinematic remediations? Alternatively, do we accept the live-streamed synchronous performance as unique, and therefore of literary artistic merit, but not the recorded iterations of the play in nationwide cinema venues, nor subsequent internet-streamed home entertainment versions? Inevitably, there are awkward issues of logic and consistency engendered by any one of these categorical choices.

Another problem arising from Benjamin Bennett’s reference to ‘categorical disparities,’ referenced above, is that the institution of theatre generates countless productions of literary drama texts that may vary considerably according to the insights and idiosyncrasies of the directorial vision and the interpretations of a chosen cast of actors. Cuts to the literary text, to say nothing of topical allusions and codification on the part of a director or literary dramaturge, mean that the ‘original’ play text can become a protean, flexible property. The hybrid codes and conventions of theatre-in-cinema and the interpretative role of the camera in the screened performance remove the work further from any clear sense of an original authorial vision.

Even in the case of a contemporary play such as *Prima Facie*, which is likely to have been interpreted more closely in line with the original authorial vision, the play debuted in Australia and only transferred to London after COVID. The Sydney production used a different performer and director team to that of the London production, and it is probable that changes were made accordingly before the more ‘fixed’ dramatic text was published and the London production was rehearsed and staged. The idea of a single, permanently fixed literary text, as in the case of a conventional novel or poem following its publication, is much less applicable in the case of dramatic art; not only are minor changes made to drama scripts in the rehearsal process, but also, perhaps unintentionally, in specific iterations of the work.

All of this suggests that dramatic texts in performance are not only protean but phenomenologically multiple creations in terms of their modes of production and reception. Does this necessitate considering them as somehow less literary? I believe the resounding answer is ‘no’. Novels, as Bakhtin observed, are polyphonic, multi-accented texts [15], creating their own multi-consciousness world, and open to numerous diverse readings and interpretations, particularly in the matter of mental imagery of characters, settings and events. By contrast, in a representational art form such as drama, there is less freedom of imagination for the audience; they inevitably partake more of the director’s and stage designer’s conceits for the work than if they were simply reading the play, as they would a novel. However, as Bakhtin stresses, no single point of view or single truth is pre-eminent, and, as both dramatic examples show, there are competing truths at play. The dialogic imagination is thus engaged, not only by the interplay between characterological perspectives and ideologies, but in this case also by the interplay of collaborative authorial voices and inputs.

As the theatre-in-cinema phenomenon demonstrates, the dynamic reciprocity flowing between technology, performance and literature is constitutive of contemporary cultural production. The case-study performance texts discussed above epitomise this vibrant reciprocity. Literature, whether on the page on the stage, or in cinema, has always spoken to open-minded readers and audiences about their lives and the societies in which they live. As the case study works exemplify, they communicate themes, ideas and messages, whether serious or ironic, that our AI-obsessed, post-truth² society needs to hear. Literary art is among the first casualties of authoritarian regimes, precisely because it is dangerous to such forms of government, but in open, progressive societies literary art is always nurtured, both in private and public contexts of reception. We may conclude, on reflection, that many art forms, including ballet, opera and cinema enjoy fruitful reciprocal relationships with literary works. To sum up, it is valid to conceive of technologically enhanced theatrical literary arts as part of a continuum of varying independent or interdependent forms of contemporary cultural production.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest, nor any research project funding, is involved in the authorship of the present chapter.

² Post-truth, not in the sense of competing perspectives on truth, as demonstrated in *Coriolanus* and *Prima Facie*, but in the sense of deliberate and cynical distortion and manipulation of verifiable facts by tech companies and other sociopolitically motivated players.

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Semiotics of the Carer: An Archetypal Analysis of Trunks from Dragon Ball Z

Thiago Barbosa Soares

Abstract

The chapter aims to explore the archetype of the carer in Trunks from Dragon Ball Z through a semiotic and psychological lens. It delves into how Trunks' roles as a carer, warrior, and son reflect Japanese cultural values such as filial piety and societal responsibility. The study analyzes how Trunks' interactions with other characters and symbolic actions, such as turning Super Saiyan, communicate deeper meanings regarding his archetype as a carer and his negotiation between stability, mastery, belonging, and independence. By using a Jungian conceptualization of archetypes and exploring the basic needs of archetypal constitution, the study sheds light on the unique aspects of the carer archetype in Trunks as he embarks on his hero's journey.

Keywords: archetype, semiotics, carer, trunks, Dragon ball Z

1. Introduction

Caring is often regarded as a noble action, but its demands frequently exceed what individuals can offer. Despite its romanticized image, care encompasses complex emotional and social responsibilities. It requires not only attention but a deep, sustained commitment that is integral to human relationships. Caring can be one of the most arduous actions undertaken by anyone. In order to care, you need care, since the lack of care implies ignorance of care. Caring seems noble and, to a large extent it is, but it often requires much more than can be offered. The romantic coating that surrounds the application of care goes beyond any heroic act, as it is seen as necessary and, at the same time, contingent, unlike care, which can rarely be fortuitous. Therefore, even if the illusion present in the act of caring is crossed with meanings configured in multiple existential demands, the carer is undoubtedly a figure of absolute relevance to human development.

Thus, the process whose result is the desire to welcome is called care. "Care is not only essential in life processes, especially in personal and social relationships, whether as loving care, as concern-care, or as precaution-care, but it is also present throughout the evolutionary process" ([1], p. 40). In this way, "What opposes carelessness and disregard is care. Caring is more than an act; it is an attitude. Therefore, it encompasses more than a moment of attention, zeal and care" ([2], p. 37). In view of this

idiosyncratic functioning, it can be said that care “represents an attitude of occupation, concern, accountability and affective involvement with the other” ([2], p. 37).

It is fundamentally important to emphasize the internal, external, restricted, and broad characteristics included in the complex architecture of care. On the psychological horizon, care spreads from the inside out or in the opposite direction, mobilizing internal and external resources for the carer. For the carer, Trunks, in this case, if there is no reason for exercising an attitude of care, the action could be seriously compromised. Consequently, the carer’s conditions of existence must also contribute to the effectiveness of care. In the context of action, regarding the “object”, care can be individual when it is directed at a being or even the carer themselves; it can be collective when it directly affects a group of beings. With these elements articulated in the protein synthesis of care, we have the founding proportionality of social bonds. “This is where care becomes important. It always has to do with human relationships and the protection of life, whether healing past wounds or preventing future ones” ([1], p. 134).

As you can see, it is not just today that care has such gravity. Given the historical breadth of the social use of the word “care”, this morphological alteration may sound a little different today. That said, according to Faria [3] in Latin “cura - subs. f. - means: care, concern and, hence, the specialized meanings: direction, charge (administrative language); curatorship (legal language); cure, treatment (medical language)”. In addition to this factor, the properties of the semantic field linked to care can also vary, as in diligent, helpful, and solicitous, among others. Consequently, the etymology of the lexical item in question affects its various uses, since the carer can also be the healer in the therapeutic sense. Well, there is no possibility that the curator is not a carer so the linguistic expression is just an unfolding of the intrinsic existential reality imprinted on the relationship between caring and curing.

Having outlined the horizon of care and its imbrications, we can then point to a kind of primordial form in which care underlies the collective unconscious “which is a part of the psyche that can be distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not owe its existence to personal experience and is therefore not a personal acquisition” ([4], p. 53), but rather an anthropological set of psychological devices collected by the human race. Therefore, investigating the representations of deep or primordial personalities is a fundamental component of all human sciences, especially those that study the formation of the imaginary through the structuring of language in psychosocial characteristics, as in the umbrella case of the carer.

Based on these findings outlined by the objective of describing and interpreting the archetype of the carer present in Trunks (of the future), from the Dragon Ball Z anime (Akira Toriyama) [5], we carried out an analysis from the perspective of archetypal semiotics, the result of which is the articulation of semiotics with archetypal psychology. To do this, we used the Jungian concept of archetype [4], which, in turn, makes it possible to apply extensively the four points of the basic needs of archetypal constitution [6] on which the analysis is based, with the intention of understanding the valence of the main traits linked to the carer’s semiotic structure.

In order to achieve the scope of this chapter, we followed the methodological-heuristic outline of archetypal semiotics developed in “The semiotics of the hero: the conflagration of Son Goku’s ascending path” [7], in “The semiotics of the sage: an analysis of the constitution of Piccolo’s journey in Dragon Ball Z” [8] and in “The semiotics of the friend: an analysis of the composition of Kuririn’s companionship in Dragon Ball Z” [9]. Thus, in accordance with the architectural organization of this text, three sections are subsequently opened. The first, “The (narrative) semiosis of

the archetype of Trunks (of the future)”, in which we describe and interpret Trunks’ semiotic disposition in the light of the archetypal functioning of the carer, according to the four constituent phases of the narrative [10]. The second, “The semiotics of basic needs in the carer in Dragon Ball Z”, in which the relationship between the four points of the basic needs of archetypal constitution [6], demonstrates the semiotic narrativity of Trunks (of the future). The concluding section, “Final considerations”, evaluates the possible contributions of the research undertaken.

2. The semiosis (narrative) of the trunks archetype

To examine the archetypal narrative structure of Trunks within the Dragon Ball Z universe, it is crucial to first contextualize the semiotic framework in which his story unfolds. Understanding that there are two versions of Trunks—one from the future and one from the present—each with distinct characteristics, is fundamental to discerning their respective roles in the narrative development of Dragon Ball Z (Akira Toriyama) and, for this examination, delineating which one dynamically represents the archetype of the carer [5]. It is essential to note, however, that this is not merely a coincidence of names; both Trunks are, in fact, the same character encountered at different points in time, since one comes from the future, approximately 20 years ahead, and the other is due to be born shortly after the first visit by the other. With these clarifications in place, it becomes evident that Future Trunks provides the primary avenue for investigating the carer archetype from a semiotic perspective, thus, this investigation will be conducted through the lens of archetypal semiotics.

Having laid the groundwork for the initial treatment of the main aspects of the carer archetype in Trunks of the Future, we can move on to the procedures used to describe and interpret the architecture of its semiotic composition. The generative path of the meaning of the four constituent phases of the narrative [10], in conjunction with the characterization of the Jungian concept of archetype, anchored in the phases traveled by the hero [11], is articulated with a view to a consistent understanding of the narrative semiosis of the carer archetype present in Trunks. Using this approach, part of the semiosis that makes up the configuration of the carer archetype can be analyzed; the other part requires an investigation of the valences that exist in the main basic needs of archetypal constitution [6], which, in turn, concludes the application of the theoretical-methodological procedure of archetypal semiotics.

In order to describe and interpret the archetype of the carer present in Trunks of the future, from the anime Dragon Ball Z (Akira Toriyama), through the operationalization of archetypal semiotics, it is essential to refer to “the fictional representativeness of the character in question, who is an actant from the point of view of a functional grammar of cases of action according to their performance in the narrative space” ([9], p. 32). In this sense, it is essential to note that “The concept of actant must also be interpreted in the context of the grammar of cases in which each case can be considered as the representation of an actantial position” ([12], pp. 12–13). In other words, Trunks is an entity with significant value in the narrative structure of Dragon Ball Z since his entry into the story causes the attitudes of other characters to become entangled in the semiotic fabric of the plot. In this way, Trunks should be considered an actant, as he fits into the evaluative representation acquired within the forces existing in the Dragon Ball Z universe.

Every narrative is comprised of multiple actants who, depending on the circumstances, assume varied roles throughout the story’s progression, however “The hero’s

actance fills the space of the narrative even in his absence, establishing its centripetal force in relation to the other actants” ([7], p. 116). In view of this observation and its repercussions on the grammar of existing actantial cases, “In the progression of narrative discourse, the actant can assume a certain number of actantial roles, defined simultaneously by the actant’s position in the logical chain of the narration and by their modal investment” ([12], p. 13). Such a description theorizes the actual performance of a protagonist, for example, Son Goku from Dragon Ball Z.

Goku, while often portrayed as the central figure, does not always emerge as the savior or victor in every battle. This is exemplified in the future timeline of Trunks, where Goku succumbs to a fatal heart disease. In this catastrophic situation, all the main character’s companions are defeated by evil androids, leaving only the warrior of “hope”, Trunks. From this point of view, he is the most important player in the story, both in the future and in the present. To try to save the future, his own present, Trunks returns to the past, the continuous present of the narrative, to save Son Goku from his pathology and take him back to his own time to fight alongside the legendary warrior Z against the powerful androids number 17 and 18. Faced with this context experienced by Trunks, Greimas and Courtés [12] are right to point out the multiplicity of the number of thematic roles that a character can play. This narrow perception leads to a confrontation with the widespread understanding that narratives are performative sets of actions sustained by a hero because when we elevate an adjuvant actant to the condition of being responsible for building a semiotic ballast, we are leading to the archetype of the carer.

Archetypes are fundamental patterns in the psyche that exist universally across different cultures. These archetypes, such as the hero, friend, outlaw, sage, and carer, are stored in the collective unconscious, which is separate from an individual’s personal experiences. The collective unconscious is a shared anthropological entity, where these archetypes are maintained. Archetypes serve as activated nuclei within this collective unconscious, organizing symbolic representations and influencing behavior patterns. Through the concept of archetype, Jungian analytical psychology explores the timeless and universal aspects of the human psyche that manifest in various cultures and societies.

As understanding from what it has said, the formation of the archetype, in its semiotic structure, is configured by crystallizing a primordial image, that is, an ethnological personality with few variations. It is on the horizon of this observation that Hillman states that “An archetypal image operates like the original meaning of the idea (from the Greek *eidōs* and *eidolon*): not only ‘that which’ is seen, but also ‘that through which’ it is seen ([13], p. 41). Therefore, the identification of an archetypal figure depends on the interpretation of deep connections of performance and valence reproduced in narratives according to which the actantial orientation reflects the archetype of certain meanings whose orbit involves one or more archetypal images. “If we examine them in more detail, we will see that they are, in a way, the result of countless experiences typical of an entire genealogy” ([14], p. 82). Given this explanation, the semiotics of the carer expressed by Trunks of the future in Dragon Ball Z reproduces genealogical characteristics whose performance, *mutatis mutandis*, resembles that of the mythological Quiron, known as the wounded healer.

Trunks, in his semiotic architecture, rivals Son Goku’s protagonism, since in his own time arc, he is the central character responsible for saving the world. Trunks’ entry into the linearized narrative action of Dragon Ball Z saves him from an illness,

thus presenting the main archetypal characteristic to be considered a carer. The carer archetype, embodied by Future Trunks, intervenes to assist the hero, safeguarding the integrity of the timeline through his actions, to gain the halo of the protagonist's actantial stature. As we can initially see from the immanent characteristics of the carer in Trunks, the character takes shape and semantic thickness as the combinations and articulations are realized on distinct levels [15, 16] of the narrative's semiotic progression. For this interlinking of different circumstances involved in the construction of a nuclear actor, such as Trunks, there are some planes of semiotized structures, such as the sequence outlined by Campbell [11]: (1) the ordinary world; (2) the call to adventure; (3) the refusal of the call; (4) the meeting with the mentor; (5) the crossing of the threshold; (6) the tests, allies, and enemies; (7) the approach to the goal; (8) the ultimate ordeal; (9) the conquest of the reward; (10) the way back; (11) the purification; and (12) the transformed return.

Goku invariably went through all these stages [7], while Trunks, despite being integrated into the narrative at the 6th stage of the protagonist's development, also goes through practically all of them. By considering this comparative situation between the action of the two archetypes, the hero in Goku [7] and the carer in Trunks, it is possible to outline the synthesis of the hero's journey [11] for the warrior of the future. (1) His life until the appearance of the evil androids No. 17 and 18. (2) The training carried out by his master Gohan; the only fighter alive until then. (3) There is no such stage in his journey. (4) Trunks meets two mentors at contrasting times, in his own time, with Gohan, in the past, with his father, Vegeta. (5) The loss of his combat mentor, Gohan, which allows him to transform into a super Sayajin. (6) His vein attempts to confront the androids; the construction of the time machine by his mother, Bulma. (7) Going back in time when Son Goku was still alive; training with Vegeta in the time room (in which each day is equivalent to a year). (8) The confrontation of Cell, in his perfect form, after his father was defeated by him. (9) The victory of the Z warriors against Cell. (10) The return to the future. (11) The easy defeat of androids 17 and 18. (12) This stage can be understood as follows: the return to his timeline with much more experience and power (while remaining humble, kind, and caring, with the same psychological traits as before).

Having seen how the stages of actantial progression of the hero's journey in Trunks are allocated, by briefly tracing the twelve stages in which the actantiality of a protagonist is commonly constructed, in this case in the narrative configuration of Trunks, it is possible to understand why Vogler [17] highlights the carer or threshold guardian as one of the emanations of the hero himself, as can be seen below (**Figure 1**).

In a centrifugal dynamic, the hero is at the center of the emanation of other actors who are significant for the flow and development of narratives. These semiotized roles can also be called archetypes, as they are present in practically all existing narrative structures on a large anthropological scale. That is why the hero is at the center, leading the conflicting composition of the plots, and their developments are on the circular periphery. The performative presence of the threshold guardians with the carer in Dragon Ball Z, Trunks, can be seen in this context. With due regard for the differences between the semiotics of one and the other, "The Guardians seem to appear out of nowhere, at the various thresholds that serve as entrances to new situations in the course of the journey, in the narrow and dangerous passages between one stage of life and another" ([17], p. 29). On the other hand, Trunks, who appears out of nowhere in the present time arc of the Dragon Ball Z story, does not restrict his



Figure 1.
Emanations of the hero ([17], p. 50).

actions to any threshold, portal, or passageway; rather, he collaborates decisively with the unfolding of the intended narrative project. However, Trunks is the guardian of tomorrow, or as his mother calls him, “the light of hope”.

The narrative semiosis of the curator archetype in Future Trunks, according to the work of Vogler [17] metonymically resembles the guardian of the threshold, has deep similarities with the semiotic project of the hero-protagonist of Dragon Ball Z. Consequently, “Both for this reason and for the understanding that a narrative project can be better understood through the complementarities that the sum of the analyses of its adjacent actants produces” ([9], p. 35), it is possible to direct the examination of the multiplicity of narrative semioses present in the Trunks archetype, based on the modular expression of the hero’s actantial configuration. Given this observation and with a view to demonstrating the scheme of the four constituent phases of the narrative in the development of the archetype of Trunks as curator, we use the following sequence described by [10], p. 57):

MANIPULATION → → COMPETENCE → SANCTION

It is important to emphasize that the above stages are part of the narrative plan of actors with highly significant roles in a story. Thus, the achievement of each one gives rise to the other, organizing the actions of those involved. From this perspective, “Manipulation has the contractual structure of communication” (Barros, 2002, p. 37), in other words, “the addresser-manipulator transforms the modal competence of the addressee by placing them, during communication, in a position of lack of freedom or of not being able to accept the proposed contract. The recipient is led to make a forced choice” (Barros, 2002, p. 37). With this same direction in mind, Trunks is manipulated by the place in which he is placed when his master, Gohan, is murdered by androids 17 and 18. As he is the last warrior capable of standing up to these enemies, but not defeating them, the manipulation takes place with the carer forced to act. The caregiver, therefore, demands from Trunks the necessary competence to remedy the situation in which he finds himself, so it is possible to state: “Manipulation and competence are correlative, that is, they are different points of view on the acquisition program” (Barros, 2002, p. 36) of actantial knowledge and competences.

In the dimension associated with competence, Trunks, helped by his mother, builds a time machine to return to the past and, with the knowledge he has of future events, finds a way to defeat his opponents in his own timeline. “So, as can be seen, it

is as a result of manipulation that the actor develops a competence, a kind of knowing how to act, in order to perform this knowledge, that is, to performatize” ([9], p. 35). Now, after the warrior of the future puts his competence into performance, he saves Goku and his allies, but a new and more powerful enemy appears, Cell. At this stage of Trunks’ performance, his training in the time room with Vegeta amplifies his powers to the point where he surpasses his father in the fight against Cell in his fully developed form. Therefore, Trunks’ performance is amplified by the need of his friends and family from his past to defeat such a powerful enemy. In this way, Trunks not only corroborates the status of the carer archetype, but also projects, with the interlinking of the two sanctions he experiences (passively and actively), the closure of the threat from both the past and the future.

It is in this horizon of closure of the four constituent phases of the narrative that “Sanction, the last phase of the narrative algorithm, presents itself as a necessary end” (Barros, 2002, p. 39). Thus, the enemies had to be defeated, and they were. Cell, after a lot of fighting, has his powers overcome by Gohan and is defeated by the latter. With the restoration of peace in this timeline, Trunks returns to his present to take out androids 17 and 18. The sanction imposed by Vegeta’s son from the future on these enemies is total disappearance, since the carer from the future has had his competence raised to the maximum of his capabilities and quickly establishes peace for the reconstruction of his world. In this sense, Trunks not only plays the role of hero, but also that of carer or guardian of the future. Therefore, to conclude, the phases of manipulation, competence, performance, and sanction, as elaborated through narrative syntax involving state and action utterances, effectively shape the semiotic structure of Trunks as an actant in the Dragon Ball Z narrative. Not the verbal characteristic involved in Trunks’ actantial composition, but the activities involved in the four phases of the narrative of which he is the responsible agent. However, there are still semiotic elements to be deduce regarding the squaring of the basic needs that shape the play of meanings of the carer archetype [6] in Trunks.

3. The semiotics of basic needs in the carer in Dragon Ball Z

With a view to treating the semiotics of the basic needs [6] of the members of Trunks of the future in Dragon Ball Z, it is essential to discern semiotics as a broad field of investigation whose theoretical-analytical determinations refer to the particularities of the corpus under examination. Since “Semiotics, being the general science of signification, is fundamentally linked to the philosophy of language, but it moves away from it when there is a communicative object to be investigated” ([7], p. 120), as is the case in this article. Therefore, “As can be seen, it is a theory of signs, representation and knowledge, which elaborates an extension of logic into the territory of cognition and the experience of phenomena” ([18], p. 96). Consequently, “For these and other reasons, semiotics is not just a theory, but a common practice. It is so because the semantic system changes and it can only describe it partially and in response to concrete communicative events” ([19], p. 172).

Faced with the view that semiotics uses a certain theoretical-analytical tool based on the compositional determinations of the object under study, “it is interesting to note that the archetype, as a structure according to which a grammar of acts works that are also cadenced by a narrative project, is first and foremost a semiosis” ([9], p. 37). This means that the architectural project of an archetype does not differ

from a character whose characteristics gain prominence due to their contrast with others on the level of actantial constructions, receiving its own grammar of functioning, both on a global and local level. As an illustration of this performative conduct that exists in the grammar of both archetypes and actants, we can recall the descriptions by Todorov [20], Vogler [17], and Campbell [11], among others, about the activities performed by certain characters that universally create stable actantial structures. An example of this property should both clarify part of the archetype's composition and validate the necessary way of analyzing basic needs for the archetypal semiotics that is being developed here.

As you can see, there are a number of archetypal figures, such as the wise old man. It is common knowledge that all wise men have shared characteristics, since "the strength of the construction of the characteristics of the wise character lies fundamentally in a serene and circumspect behavior" ([8], p. 24). From this observation, the inference is that the global character of the archetype is fulfilled by universalization of semiosis, while the local character is determined by actantial particularities pertinent to the narrative program in which the character participates. In other words, a specific type of archetype already has its anthropological grammar in the collective memory which, in turn, is actualized in characters with attributes similar to those of its archetypal matrix, but it is likely, as we have seen in this text, that there are not only correspondences. From this perspective, as we have been able to analyze in the narrative semiosis of the Trunks archetype, any and all actors can develop an archetypal performance [11], especially when it comes to one who dilates their ipseity in such a way as to compete with the protagonist in terms of relevance to the resolution of conflicts and, consequently, to the unfolding of the plot.

In accordance with the points raised above, and because it is an integral part of the semiosis of the carer in Trunks, in line with the objective of describing and interpreting the archetype of the carer in Dragon Ball Z, the semiotics of the basic needs of archetypal constitution [6] is used here to conduct the final stage of this analysis. For a better structural illustration, below is an image of the arrangement of the constituent elements of the basic needs (**Figure 2**).

It is possible to verify the quadrature of the basic needs of archetypal constitution, so that there is a diametrically opposed relationship between the semantic poles of belonging and independence, stability, and mastery. In view of the universal application of the quadrature of the basic needs of archetypal constitution [6], not only we can verify the semiotic dynamics based on which a given character bases its characteristics on archetypal semiosis. We can also identify the narrative project involved in the fictional structure articulated in the internal and external behaviors of actors whose complexity actualizes archetypal formations. In this theoretical-analytical orientation, the intersection of these poles, belonging, independence, stability, and mastery, engenders the actantial process of an archetypal character, as is the case of the carer in Trunks of the future in the Dragon Ball Z universe.

Trunks initially belongs to a future in which all the Z warriors, Son Goku's companions, are dead and a global catastrophe has hit everyone, androids 17 and 18. Belonging to a tragedy and standing in a place of hope drives the last sayajin to seek greater power in order to restore peace and security to his world. Thus, Trunks' belonging to a macabre place full of destruction launches him on his quest for independence. When he comes across his master, Gohan, murdered by his enemies, the first step, he takes: developing his independence. The fighter of the future, during

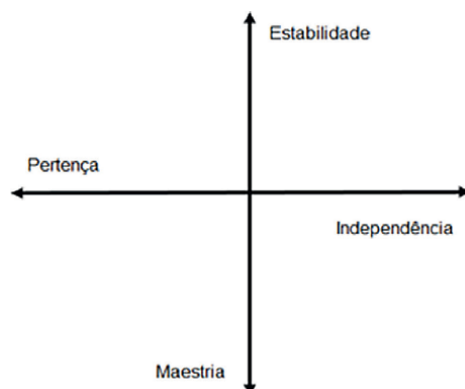


Figure 2.
Basic needs of archetypal constitution ([6], p. 214).

chaos and growing anger, unleashes all his desire to change the situation in which he lives and, with this mixture of feelings, transforms himself into the super sayajin. This step for Trunks represents the beginning of his independence as a warrior. In this way, “It is most likely that he consciously maintained his archetypal identity of the Prestative, giving the world constant reassurance that everything would be all right” ([6], p. 34) in order to return to the past and find a solution there to defeat his tormentors.

It is worth pointing out that Trunks’ actantial independence is achieved as he joins the group of fighters from his past, especially his father, Vegeta. In this sense, the fact that demonstrates the connection between the functioning of both the horizontal and vertical axes of the square of the basic needs of the archetypal carer in Dragon Ball Z can be found in the fight against Cell in his final form. After intense training in the time room, Trunks and Vegeta go up against the monster Cell: “Here the relationship between instability and stability, as a semiotic composition of both the narrative structure and the archetypal property, takes the direction of the last component point of the basic needs, that is, it turns to mastery” ([7], p. 124). The son not only patiently waits for his father to start the fight against the enemy, but also interferes precisely at the moment when his genitor is about to be eliminated. From this comes the relationship between stability and mastery instilled in the narrative project in which the carer archetype develops. By letting Vegeta fight Cell, Trunks puts himself in the place of stability belonging to the obedient son, but when he sees his father at serious risk, his mastery is set in motion within the semiotic circuit of the basic needs of the carer archetype.

Saving his father, after allowing him to fight, is, at the same time, testimony to the promotion of both the semantic pole of stability and the semantic pole of mastery. This is so because the former is the result of the introjection of his “subordinate” role to his father, the proud prince of the sayajins, while the latter derives from the mastery of his new power acquired and presented in the fight against Cell. Having outlined the way in which Trunks expresses the basic needs of the carer archetype [6], it can be said that the warrior of the future fulfills an absolutely important role in the development of the story’s plot. In addition to updating the figure of a heroic caregiver, from the conjunction of narrative semiosis and the semiotic structure of basic archetypal needs, the heroic carer is capable of divesting himself of his own

difficulties to act as a protagonist. Therefore, Trunks, according to his trajectory, regulates his time by returning and destroying the evil androids, and allows a parallel timeline, by helping those who become his new family, a future of hopes and new adventures.

4. Conclusions

With the aim of describing and interpreting the archetype of the carer present in Trunks of the future, from the Dragon Ball Z anime (Akira Toriyama) [5], we conducted an analysis from the perspective of archetypal semiotics, the result of which is the articulation of semiotics with archetypal psychology. To this end, we mobilized the Jungian concept of archetype which, in turn, enabled an analytical description of the narrative semiosis of this character, through the sequence of stages outlined by Campbell [11], the emanations of the hero drawn up by Vogler [17], and the use of the four points of the basic needs of archetypal constitution set out by Mark and Pearson [6]. In view of the fulfillment of the intended purpose and the multiple reflections that have emerged from this investigation of the archetype of the carer in Trunks, we can affirm what Ernest Cassirer postulates about the foundation of the elucidative state of mythical components for understanding the world and its countless intertwined meanings [21], because “There is no natural phenomenon, and no phenomenon of human life, that is not susceptible to a mythical interpretation, and that does not call for an interpretation” ([22], p. 123).

Through the scrutinizing process undertaken within the perspective of archetypal semiotics, it was possible to see the traces of the carer archetype in the actor in question, who subsequently ascends to his own hero's journey. Trunks, as an extremely important character in the Dragon Ball Z narrative project, acts as a nuclear actor, or rather as a protagonist, from the moment he appears to destroy Freeza before Son Goku arrives on Earth. By saving the hero of the Dragon Ball Z universe, his father and, of course, the future to which he belongs, the carer is elevated to the status of hero without whom the semiotic tracing of the archetypal values imprinted on fiction would be displaced from its axis of canonical projective linearity of the great story plots. The possibility of the non-existence of Trunks' actance is distorted by the *deus ex machina*, a resource present in works in which a caregiver is not inserted into the narrative as a project articulated by the plot.

In view of the degree to which the warrior of the future is committed to his timeline and his past, it can be said that his evolutionary process has a direct impact on the unfolding of the Dragon Ball Z plot, enriching the actantial planes organized within it. At the same time, the unconscious desire that “continues through the archetypal symbols, which represent the collective unconscious” ([23], p. 373) can be perceived through the virtualization of semioses narrativized in characters with greater structuring dynamics for a given semiotic compositional set, as in Trunks case. In this sense, the archetype of the carer demonstrates that “Every story requires a starting point that is not good enough and another ending point that is better. Nothing can be measure in the absence of that point of arrival, that higher value” ([24], p. 85). In other words, brought to the perspective in which the warrior of tomorrow plays the role of carer, turning toward otherness is, to a large extent, going to meet oneself, since the integration of the carer with the person receiving their care refers to the projection of that person into the other in a psychodynamic movement metaphorized in the following description by Campell and Moyers: “Where we

imagined we were travelling far away, we will find ourselves at the center of our own existence. And there, where we thought we were alone, we will be in the company of the entire world” ([25], p. 131). It is in this associated horizon that the analysis of the archetype present in Trunks allows us to see the carer as the depository of more than one performative face, as well as its necessary actuality.

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From Sacred Murals to Drama Characters – Intermedial and Transmedial Transformations of Verbal and Visual Images of the Seven Slavic Saints (Saints Heptaritmoi) in Bulgarian Culture (Eighteenth: Twentieth Century)

Elena Azmanova-Rudarska

Abstract

The cult of the Seven Slavic Saints, also known as Saints Heptaritmoi, occurred during the Bulgarian Revival and grew as a typical religious veneration. There are preserved murals in temples, which speak more than the salvaged historical records. The first liturgy dedicated to them dates from 1720, following the much earlier painted frescoes of 1612. The cult has developed over time, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the saints became characters in literary works. The central thesis of the present research is that the veneration of the group of the Seven Slavic Saints appeared from the depictions in the churches, progressed through textual interpretations, and ended up as theatre characters. These modes of movement occurred through intermedial and transmedial transposition of meanings from image to narrative and from narrative to stage. This proved to be fundamental not only for the collective's historical contexts and social needs but also for highlighting the processes of secularisation in Bulgarian society at the end of the nineteenth century; for the atheistic ideological positions of the socialist rule after 1944; and for the resurgence of religious influence in Bulgarian social life during the 1970s and 1980s of the twentieth century. The intermedial and transmedial dimensions of literary transformations offered new opportunities for bridging image-text-theatre under the influence of cultural policy and political culture.

Keywords: Seven Slavic Saints, frescoes, theatre, intermedia, transmedia

1. Introduction

The veneration of the Seven Slavic Saints—Saints Heptaritmoi was one of the central religious cults in the Balkans during the late Middle Ages and the early National Revival. Its occurrence was the turning point towards modern thinking and the construction of new ideas in the literature of the South Slavs, especially in the territories of modern North Macedonia, Albania, and Bulgaria [1–4]. The transformational processes of religious adoption began as early as the tenth century, as each figure in the group went through a stage of canonisation [5]. It is assumed today that the group of the Seven Slavic Saints includes Constantine-Cyril of Thessaloniki, Methodius of Moravia, Clement of Ohrid, Naum of Ohrid, Angelarius, Gorazd, and Sava [2]. This local religious cult slowly and continuously transformed into a secular rite, thus shaping a complex of festive usages that concentrated on a comprehensive praise of the Slavic enlighteners, creators, and disseminators of the Slavic alphabet. The genesis of this group of Slavic saints has been the subject of many years of research and numerous scientific hypotheses that will not be analysed here. The present study's focus is the moment of transformation from religious to secular and from sacred to modern literary myth.

However, today the Seven Slavic Saints are more media than textually detectable—their images are coherent and are unambiguously interpreted and accepted. At the same time, the literary interpretations sound distant to today's reader. What has brought this idiosyncrasy to the image—verbal and artistic? Why does the text that should be the carrier of the religious image turn out to be insufficient to manifest figures that have become emblems not through the narrative about themselves but through their portrayal? Their popularity in secular celebrations opposes their canonical ascendance in religious rituals and gives them a duality of non-simultaneity and multi-spatiality, destabilising their status as saints.

From the first records until today, the figures of the Seven Slavic Saints have smoothly progressed through frescoes, text (liturgical, historiographical, and dramaturgical), and performing arts. From canonical cognition, they have become a popular object of veneration.

Their transformation involved various genres and strategies (fresco, drama, and film), and their characters were pervaded by multiple messages, from the mediaeval religious theme through a National Revival symbol to the artistic interpretations of modern cinema.

Thus, the Seven Slavic Saints represented the group coherence society sought. The large-scale promotional strategies for their secular acknowledgement unequivocally moved from the sublime and canonical art, to popular mass culture and from static to dynamic display. The cultural memory of the Seven Slavic Saints has been built through the active accumulation of meanings. Ritual and celebration were the central components of the sacralisation and desacralisation of the cult from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

Jan Assman describes ritual and celebration as essential forms of organising cultural memory in oral societies ([6], p. 41). Still, these models prove vital in transitioning from the oral to the written period and from a religious to a secular cult. The activation of the whole “Seven Slavic Saints” corps happened through religious perception complemented by rituals aiming at the permanent inscription of the figures in the collective memory: relics, dates of communal veneration, liturgy and religious processions, liturgical, hagiographic and hymnal texts, and mural and iconic representation. Specifically, they all created a feeling of “multimedia staging” ([6], p. 42) as part of the memory-preserving function.

The present study tackles the possibility of mediaeval religious temple images (murals and icons) undergoing various textual and visual configuration models, from sacred murals through Bulgarian Revival dramaturgy to modern theatre and film of the twentieth century. In the transposition process from icon to cinema, they function as peculiar media constructs where a transfer of information from one work of art to another takes place through the modulation of characters, genres, or literary and extraliterary forms. In the opinion of López-Varela, who underlines that “intermediality has been contemplated as defining the relationships between art forms, technologies and spaces of meaning” [7]. The present study is also based on the research of Higgins [8], Medaglia [9], and Ryan et al. [10].

This highlights late mediaeval culture as a programme of intermedial potential in which text, image, relics, ritual, etc., smoothly proceeded from religious to secular ideologisation. The re-modelling of these cultural systems in the settings of secularisation (during the National Revival) and atheism (during socialism) desecralised the characters, and their function grew through the transmedial transfer of meanings from one cultural “platform” to another.

This study aims to describe the accumulation of meanings in the perception of the Seven Slavic Saints as figures of a deliberately organised cultural memory and analyse their characters in various intermedial and transmedial construction models. The communicative potential of these supersystems was formed by intertwining the collective identification mechanisms with the personal memory. Thus, the transition of the cult of the saints from religious to secular activated super meanings for the community.

2. From image to text: The sacred visual art

The occurrence of the first murals of the Seven Slavic Saints, which preceded the Saints Heptaritmoi's Liturgy, confirms the notion that depiction transfer from word to image (drawing) and back to word was entirely possible during the late Middle Ages.

The earliest fresco of the Saints Heptaritmoi, dated 1612, is found in the Holy Mother of God Slimnitsa Monastery in Prespa, North Macedonia ([2], p. 578; [11], p. 580). The Saints are presented side by side in the bottom row and at full height. Akin is their presentation dated 1706 in the St. Naum Monastery in Ohrid, North Macedonia ([12], p. 82). Still, the group here is more compact, “full height, in frontal poses with the figures on the sides slightly turned towards the centre” ([13], p. 156). The saints' depiction “in a row” corresponded to the symbolism of the horizontal axis, whose shortened perception implied the path, suggesting a beginning, evolution, and elevation.

However, the connections within the group were insufficiently strong to view them as an entirety; their images adhered more to tradition than they expressed a ritual identity or one whole. The first reports of celebrating some of the group members come from the end of the ninth century (the Saints Cyril and Methodius), and at the end of the tenth century, St. Clement of Ohrid and St. Naum of Ohrid were canonised.

The cult of Angelarius, Sava, and Gorazd occurred much later and remains largely obscure today. The perception of the saints as a group must have eventuated under the influence of a concrete exceptional event in the community's life—a plague epidemic [3], relics' transfer [4], or another still unknown reason. However, this created a new level of meaning in the communal perception—the ideological basis of the group was strongly influenced by the socio-political context.

This tense supersystem of texts, images, and relics gained enormous potential and began to overcome its initial essence as a religiously based pattern. The sacred code began to circulate as a social code, where information “flowed” from the “platform” to the perceiver and thus incorporated them into the era’s ideas. Hence, by the middle of the eighteenth century, some figures of the Saints’ group migrated from religious literature to the secular historiographical works of Hr. Zhefarovich, Paisius of Hilendar, Jovan Rajić, Hr. Pavlovich et al., and from ecclesiastical to political functionality, thus exhibiting the meanings’ transfer not only through various genres but also through different forms of perception: from religious to secular, as well as from closed to open types of culture.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, the church murals of the Saints Heptaritmoi evolved and became more sophisticated—on the fresco painted in 1744 in the Holy Mother of God Ardenica Church in Albania ([11], p. 582) the images are arranged in a pyramid structure—a modernised composition and a result of Western influence ([14], p. 194). According to R. Ruseva, it has an analogue in the mural of “Apostolic Council” ([15], p. 22) which testifies to the grown authority of the group. The same plot depicts the Seven Slavic Saints in one more place: the iconostasis of the Metropolitan Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Berat, Albania. In the wood-carved section, just below the Apostolic Council icon, there is a minute 10 cm tall medallion where the characteristic outlines of the Saints Heptaritmoi are recognisable ([15], p. 25).

The transition from frontality to pyramid arrangement of the images is a distinct sign of an ideological perception of the group—the pyramid contains a central image (Methodius of Moravia) presented as Bishop of the Church of Christ. In the first row are the saints Cyril, Methodius, and Clement, presented in the role of heralds of a religious teaching and, in addition, of Slav enlighteners whose general legitimization lies in the spiritual domain of the community.

There is also a hierarchy (bishops and monks), thus highlighting the social aspect of the group (building up a specific community of Christian followers) and its ethical mission as “teachers” ([16], p. 78). This type of disposition can very easily be interpreted in the spirit of M. Eliade’s ideas, where the sacred is loaded with additional symbolism expanding the object’s meaning. For example, the pyramid is a triangle with the tip up, symbolising spiritual ascension and awareness of the unity between the earthly and the heavenly. The medallion with the Seven Slavic Saints is positioned on the iconostasis strictly under another essential composition—that of the Biblical plot about the “Apostolic Council,” which speaks of an expansion in the meaning of the group of the saints as well as of their more intensive ideologisation.

Binding them in a shared symbolic order, vertical this time, affirmed the images both in the canonical context and in the socialisation of the group. What is more, in this church, the “Seven Slavic Saints” group was interpolated through different forms: from a mural depiction through iconostasis woodcarving and an icon of the so-called “royal” order to sacred relics (here, the relics of St. Gorazd and St. Angelarius are preserved).

Thus, church decorations, utensils, and relics activated the temple space to complement a principal element of the group cul—two of the least-known saints in it acquired a “biography” and a place for worship. Forming a space that expressed the sacred wholeness of the Saints Heptaritmoi was only a part of the implementation of the cult; its transformation established intermedial connections. It started to elaborate on additional elements that built cultural memory.

In the whole complex of denotations, problematising the authenticity of the relics was of particular importance [17] as this specific motif better outlined the intermedial mode - through the flow of worshippers who were present as an audience, the temple turned into a unique fictional space for pseudo- and para-religious oral verbal narratives: stories of alleged activity of saints, legends about their miracles and superpowers, and from these—to legends about the lost secret knowledge and the hidden Bulgarian history playing the role of “different manifestations of the same event” ([18], p. 23).

This model of imagining the past is found in all places of pilgrimage, and the peculiarity of these models is that they splice into one another and produce new meanings. The important thing here is the “floating hole” [18], or the history “orifice” as put by Genette [19], creating the necessary slackness allowing to remodel the collective memory about the Seven Slavic Saints through the means of the individual level and the communal perspective. Extending a bridge between the past and the present to re-legitimise the cult of the group of saints is carried out precisely through their popularisation, the form of which is the festival.

3. From the sacred text to collective celebration

Mediaeval texts that have survived to this day provide evidence of the ecclesiastical veneration of the Saints Heptaritmen, either by directly mentioning them or through commemorative practices. In late mediaeval literature, the group was explicitly referred to as the οἱ Ἑπτάρημοι (in Greek) and “Седмочисленици” (in Bulgarian) ([2], p. 577; [11], p. 581). The same term was also used to refer to other groups of saints, such as the Holy Seven Youths of Ephesus. Therefore, in mediaeval studies, it is accepted to refer to them as the seven Slavic enlighteners. Whether they were referred to as the Seven Slavic Saints or simply the Seven Saints is the subject of a lengthy discussion. L. Grasheva thinks that “there were seven listed,” but that “they have not been nominated as “Седмочисленици” but just as “seven in number” ([2], p. 578); i.e., there is a dispute over the translation of the term. The name is not found in mediaeval written monuments, and the term οἱ Ἑπτάρημοι refers to the Greek liturgical practices. The process of formation of this group of saints shows both the development of literary facts and the transformation of their images into other forms of description.

The formation of the Holy Seven group was gradual and slow. The earliest joint cult was of the two equal-to-apostles Cyril and Methodius. Their disciples were slowly included in a group with them. The teachers’ activities were clearly defined, while the disciples were subjected to evaluation and re-evaluation in various literary sources. In St. Methodius’s Vita (ninth century), Gorazd was described as “free” and “well-read” ([20], p. 192). The ordination in Rome of “three priests and two readers” was also mentioned there ([20], p. 188). This has likely helped to constitute the group: two teachers accompanied by five disciples made a group of seven learnt men. Theophylact of Ohrid wrote in Clement’s of Ohrid Vita (end of the eleventh—beginning of the twelfth century) about six disciples (Angelarius was missing), describing them as “chosen” and “people’s leaders” in the “rank of teachers.”

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Demetrios Chomatenos described Clement in the liturgy as “beatific,” while Methodius, Gorazd, Naum, and Sava were declared his like-minded companions. Cyril and Angelarius were missing,

though. Constantine Kabasilas enumerated in his Canon about St. Clement of Ohrid (1255–1260) all the figures except Sava, the definition of the disciples being “the divine four.” In Cabasilas’s Canon about Saint Naum, also written between 1255 and 1260, along with the tribute to “the wise” Naum, “the divine Gorazd, the miracle-makers Clement and Angelarius, the wisest bearers of divine secrets” were cited ([21], p. 204). Thus, clues about the canonisation of some of the disciples and their entry into paradigmatic relations first appeared in written records after the thirteenth century. That is, before the cult of the seven was formed, the characters went through the symbolic four and six. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the transformation to seven occurred, with Sava being the last to be included.

It is essential to specify the first copies of the abovementioned works because they testify to the processes of building the cult of the Seven Slavic Saints. It is common knowledge that when copied, texts were often subjected to additional editing by the scribe, who managed to insert new information, correct old errors, or omit details that he considered insignificant. Therefore, each copy reflects the ideas of the era in which it was created, as well as the scribe’s knowledge of the specific issue.

The copies of manuscripts serve as a kind of radar about how particular information progressed from one register to the next—from canonical information to noncanonical perception and from divine figures to folklore characters within the community. St. Cyril’s Vita is known from its late copies, dating to 1469. In contrast, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, 66 complete copies of the Vita have survived ([22], p. 365).

The oldest copy of St. Methodius’s Vita is the Uspensky one, dating from the end of the twelfth to the beginning of the thirteenth century ([22], p. 367). The Vita of St. Clement of Ohrid is known from the thirteenth century Vatican copy, while a complete version is found in the fourteenth century Moscow copy ([23], p. 387). In the late Middle Ages, St. Cyril’s name is found among the names of other guardian saints in copies of the Penitential prayer, which is a Psalter from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries ([24], p. 386). The oldest preserved copy of St. Naum’s Vita dates to the fifteenth century, and the second Slavonic manuscript is from the sixteenth century ([25], p. 699).

All the variations in the group’s composition, name, and manifestation are a signal of its spread across various information channels among different segments of the population - both among the general population (where they were the subject of legends) and among the high clergy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This created conditions for an intensive media transfer of meanings from written to oral testimonies and from written to pictorial testimonies.

Thus, literary documents, temple frescoes, and sacred relics became the basis for a religious celebration. Church veneration provided an opportunity for both the preservation of existing texts and the creation of new ones, as well as for the creation of images and material evidence to expand their symbolism and stabilise their religious cult. There are several hypotheses about the origin of the group of the Seven, of which three prove essential for the present study. They are:

1. Сказание за превода на Свещеното писание [Liturgy of the translation of the Holy Scriptures] from the Hilendar Monastery, sixteenth century, was the first written document constituting the group of the Saints in number and roster [26, 27];

2. Служба на Йоан-Владимир, [John-Vladimir Liturgy] was the first liturgical text to include the Seven Slavic Saints group printed in Venice in 1690 [28];
3. Служба за свети Седмочисленици, [Seven Slavic Saints Liturgy] of 1741 by Grigorijs Konstantinidis, printed in Moscopole¹, Albania. Their joint canonisation was the deed of the Ohrid Archbishop Joasapha (1719–1745) [4].

It is worth noting that each text accompanied an additional religious celebration. The so-called Berat Seven Slavic Saints' Liturgy of 1720 was published in Venice by N. Papa and was disseminated in Berat, Albania. It celebrated the group of saints on November 27. Next to be published was the Moscopol Liturgy of the Seven Slavic Saints, printed in 1741 or 1742 ([29], p. 51). The service was performed on July 17 ([1], p. 433) and ([30], p. 681). It was translated into Church Slavonic as late as 1903 in Plovdiv by Hieromonk Callistratus of Hilendar; however, it was unsuccessful. After him, Bishop Parteniy of Levkia rewrote and published it in 1958.

As different liturgies commemorating the Saints Heptaritmoi emerged, the associated festivals proliferated. Each community adapted the veneration of the saints to align with its own historical and cultural narratives: in the Venetian Liturgy the saints were defined as “patrons of Belograd” (present-day Berat, Albania), “preachers and pastors” in Dalmatia, Moesia, and Bulgaria, and “enlighteners” of all of Bulgaria, Lihnida (the mediaeval name of Ohrid), and Western Greece, referring even to Epirus and Albania. In the Moscopole Liturgy, the enlighteners, saints being “salvation for the Bulgarians,” were also “the joy of the Dalmatians” ([30], p. 681).

Thus, the collective memory of the saints, created through the texts of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance, began to function super-personally [31, 32]. A. Zaradia studies their meaning in the context of the feat of Clement's of Rome seven disciples. P. Ilievski, in turn, unfolds a profound symbolic plan in the various groups of seven saints, applying the allegory of the New Testament's teachings on God's wisdom and its seven pillars. The hesitation in aspects of expression reflects the process of transforming a living memory into a communal construct of cultural memory.

This cultural memory shaped the notions of the “sacred land” (the Seven Slavic Saints were associated with a specific topos), identity, and tradition. Thus, those figures from the saintly group who were unambiguously related to the Southern Balkans region, such as Thessaloniki and Ohrid, became not only the leading figures but also objects of heightened interest; they included Cyril, Methodius, Clement of Ohrid, and, to some extent, Naum of Ohrid. The remaining three—Gorazd, Angelarius, and Sava—were not pertinent to this sacred territory, and they somehow stayed in the periphery of the community's attention.

A new intermedial transfer of meanings occurred in the eighteenth century. Then appeared texts that updated the religious cult of the Seven Saints. Among them were liturgical texts about lesser-known saints, such as Angelarius and Gorazd. Under the influence of the actively ongoing geopolitical processes in the Balkans, during which the borders of the Constantinople, Ohrid, and Pec Patriarchates were being reformatted, the already mentioned Service for the Seven Saints occurred in the Berat region, along with a local cult—a temple with the relics of St. Gorazd and the icon of the Assumption of St. Gorazd and St. Angelarius. Thus, the Holy Land preserved the

¹ Moscopole is the medieval name of today's Voskopoja, Albania. In the eighth century it was an important cultural centre where numerous religious publications were printed.

memory of those saints who managed to establish a unique identification mechanism, thereby expanding the tradition. The unique identification mechanism was built through the set of general symbols used in the church ritual. It went through the composition of liturgical texts, the creation of icon images, and the transfer of relics. At the same time, this was not an authentic encoded ritual from the time of the hero's death (which was in the ninth–tenth centuries) but a new cultural formation that mediated the desacralisation of the cult.

From this point, the road to the modern secular cultural myth became more direct. The collective memory of the Seven Slavic Saints reshaped them, thus losing part of their authenticity—knowledge, texts, and relics. Oblivion, not remembrance, formed the socially sought emblem. At the same time, the Saints' role swarmed—if “patrons,” “preachers,” “pastors,” and “enlighteners” were explicable and clear messages to the community, “salvation” and “joy” built on and expanded the unambiguous perception of them. The tendency to “deconstruct” festive elements ([33], p. 40) involved stripping religious narratives of specific character details, transforming them into more universally accessible secular knowledge. This marked both a crisis of spiritual tradition and the emergence of secularisation trends.

At the start, the secular celebration somewhat copied the religious one while playing a secondary modelling role and arising from the need for collective participation in this secret knowledge. The celebration provided the needed sociability of the memory and was a kind of mediator between the history of the cult and the narratives about it. In this sense, the celebration desacralised the cult, transforming it into a contemporary cultural myth. The patriotic sentiments of the National Revival enabled the saints' personages to attain another intermedial manifestation—to be present on stage, intensifying the transition from ritual to celebration.

4. From celebration to literary text

These secular celebrations initiated a process of transmedial adaptation, in which religious figures transitioned from liturgical rituals to secular festivities and, ultimately, to artistic representations.

The emergence of secular celebrations marked a shift in the perception and commemoration of the Saints Heptaritmoy, as seen in the following examples. The first evidence of a celebration in honour of the Seven Slavic Saints dates from 1863 in the town of Eski Djumaya² ([34], p. 3), followed by the city of Sredets³ in 1864 ([35], p. 3). One of Europe's first international secular jubilees was held in 1863 on the 1000th anniversary of the Moravian mission of Cyril and Methodius and their disciples, or its secular parallel—the creation of the Slavonic alphabet. It was from 1863, according to G. Simeonova, that “May 11th began to be mentioned as a celebration day of all Slavs” ([36], p. 32).

The Grande munus of 1880, when the Roman Catholic Church canonised Cyril and Methodius, played a significant role in it becoming a general Christian celebration ([37], p. 271). The papal document recognised both their work among the Western Slavs and their devotion to the Roman Apostolic Throne. As a testament to commemorating the saints, the Grande munus decreed that their feast day be

² Today's Targovishte, Bulgaria.

³ Today's capital of Bulgaria, Sofia.

celebrated on July 6. This encyclical is clear evidence of the aspiration for rapprochement between the Eastern and Western Churches, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism.

Thus, the characters of Cyril and Methodius, along with their students, underwent a transition between two religious denominations. This process occurred within the context of spiritual ideas and involved an intermedial transfer of meanings between two extreme attitudes, the tension between which had been formed over centuries. The encyclical addressed the outbreak of disputes regarding the memory of the two saints. According to the papal document, the Roman Church supported them, whereas, for the Orthodox world, they were regarded as messengers of the Church of Constantinople.

The controversy had a positive aspect because it increased interest in both the Thessalonica brothers and their followers. Thus, the Seven Slavic Saints proved to be the needed element connecting not only religious but also intercultural worlds—they belonged to both the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, building connections between religious glorification and secular celebration.

Meanwhile, during the late National Revival, the celebration day of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius (May 11/24) sparked stage performances that included their characters⁴. For several consecutive years, celebrations with a theatrical production were held. For Bulgarian communities abroad⁵, these performances were not only emotionally engaging but also served as a means of fostering collective identity and demonstrating the social significance of religious traditions.

This peculiarity of the celebrations not only introduced a new element into the cult's collective adoption but also changed its functionality, establishing a completely dynamic and thus mobile model of collective implementation.

Works by D. Voynikov⁶ were performed in front of audiences: Райна Княгиня [Princess Raina] in Bucharest, 1866 [39], Покръщение на Преславский двор [Baptism of the Preslav Court] in Brăila in 1868 and 1869 [40]; as well as in Bolgrad⁷ in 1870, and Велислава, българска княгиня [Velislava, Bulgarian Princess] in Brăila in 1870 [41].

The three dramas visually presented a plot from Bulgarian history in which a part of the Seven Slavic Saints were dynamic characters. What is more, the play Baptism of the Preslav Court [40] was specially written for the Cyril and Methodius Day. It was the first to present an artistic interpretation (in literature and on the stage) of the characters of the two Equal-to-Apostles. Written in 1868 and staged the same year in Brăila, the work updated an essential theme about the Bulgarian Revival by interweaving popular Revival mythologems about the Bulgarian origins of the Thessalonica brothers and Methodius as the baptiser of the Bulgarians. Thus, the notion of the dramatic genre as socially impactful, the base of the historical plot, and the religious affiliation of the characters turned out to be a necessary construct for the national identification.

After the liberation from Ottoman rule, the celebrations continued under the auspices of the Eastern Orthodox church but with the active participation of the political authorities as well. For example, in 1885, the 1000th anniversary of the Dormition

⁴ On this subject see more Azmanova-Rudarska [38].

⁵ Bucharest, Brăila, Galați in Romania, Bolgrad, etc. were centres of the Bulgarian emigration community during Ottoman rule until 1878 r.

⁶ One of the first Bulgarian playwrights. Founder of the first Bulgarian theatre in Shumen in 1856.

⁷ A town in today's Ukraine; at the time concerning this study, it was within the Russian Empire.

of St. Methodius was commemorated with church services, talks, lessons in schools, as well as pupils' stage performances ([42], p. 58). In this way, the celebrations took on the form of cultural events, and the stage of the National Theatre in Sofia became the usual venue for the festivities ([43], p. 1; [44], p. 2; [45], p. 1). These celebrations employed various intermedial strategies, incorporating dramatic performances, printed texts, and visual imagery to reinforce the cultural significance of the saints. Over time, religious, political, and theatrical elements merged, forming an institutionalised model of commemoration that reinforced both national identity and ideological messages. Forms of institutionalism and interpretation began to dominate, and the stage proved to be both the unifying domain and the dynamic communicative form of the transmedial transformations of the cult.

Intermedial models were widely used as early as 1916 during the preparations for commemorating the 1000th anniversary of the Dormition of Clement of Ohrid. They started in 1915 with the setup of the committee КЛИМЕНТОВ ОТБОР [Klimentov team] at the St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, which issued УПЪТВАНЕ КЪМ БЪЛГАРСКИТЕ ОБЩИНИ [Instructions to the Bulgarian municipalities] on how to “celebrate the great anniversary of the death of the Bulgarian proto-teacher and enlightener” and “a thousand years of Bulgarian education” [46]. In addition, the Klimentov committee published a short but profusely titled brochure, Българска прослава на хилядо години от смъртта на св. Климент Охридски и на хилядо години българска просвета [Bulgarian celebration of one thousand years of the death of St. Clement of Ohrid and one thousand years of Bulgarian education]. It listed a few initiatives, including those that marked the beginning of intermedial forms of veneration, which moved from intangible to material culture—building monuments, organising exhibitions, and naming streets, schools, and community centres. The Klimentov committee's initiatives sought to create a ‘material memory’ of Clement of Ohrid, reinforcing his status as a national symbol through monuments, publications, and institutional commemorations.

The festive forms and celebrations were widely popularised in the Bulgarian press, and literary works dedicated to St. Clement of Ohrid were written. All this brought the transformation of literary texts and images to new forms of art aiming at a more comprehensive acceptance by society—the Klimentov committee's search for creating a “material memory” was quite deliberate ([46], p. 7).

The intermedial constructs were accumulated and designated to “glorify” Clement of Ohrid, “the Bulgarian proto-teacher and enlightener.” The tasks of the Klimentov committee were divided into three segments: “educational,” “social,” and “political” ([46], p. 7). The “objects” and the “ways” to honour were announced in the following manner: First, to plant a tree in a public place to be named after Clement. Second, a designated area for holding celebrations should be set up, where an inscribed plate would be placed; this area should be outside the selected settlement but on its land, and the consecrated ground was not excluded ([46], p. 9). Third, the construction of a fountain, a well, etc. Fourth, to build up a new or refurbish an existing structure (a temple, community centre, school, public bath, inn, bridge, etc.), the accent falls on improving and expanding its public service ([46], p. 9).

It was planned to mount a depiction of the saint on the building—an icon or painting ([46], p. 9). Special attention was given to another material vestige of the celebration: the renovation of memorial sites associated with local notables. They would be honoured with a memorial plate, a “sculpted image” (of plaster, marble, etc.) or “painted visage”; a monument was to be raised, a column, a vestibule—all attributed to the jubilee; no less importance was shed on the mounting of a Clement's clock on

a church or a public building; and to emphasise on an object's public importance by nominating it "Clement's."

Various prizes were also considered: in the schools, churches, and municipalities, even a special "Clement's bequest" was to be organised from the material receivables (donations and fines) as a distinction for a citizen with a contribution to the community and to support a reasonable pupil to train in a craft. The funds for the awards would be collected from donations, church gatherings in the saint's name, tickets from organised "parties, lotteries, and outings," and an auction of "things for sale"—publications or products set up by the Klimentov committee.

Material trophies proved of exceptional importance for the transmedial connections—they popularised the character through mass culture, producing transformations of figures, things, and symbols that entirely transferred the veneration of the saint to the sphere of secular celebration and public festivities organised institutionally and arrayed in ideology and politically permeated messages. The cult moved from one group veneration to another, only formally preserving the marks of the first, often supplanting some forms' meaning. All this went through assimilation of grounds and attaching new meanings—the sacred moved towards the public while the public began to connote a certain level of sacredness—the church, the chapel, and even the consecrated ground (a worshipping place of pagan gods), the school, and the municipal building.

Thus, mechanisms of power brought the secular and the spiritual closer, deliberately upbuilding collective memory. The intermedial transposition of meanings was also observed in the representation—it included icons, paintings, sculptures, monuments, memorial columns, and memorial plates. The expansion of meanings was aimed at affirming the saint's social status. The festivities themselves mirrored the model of all the holidays in Bulgaria after the liberation as a combination of religious and state governance—a church service, a secular festival, a speech (talk), Clement's bazaar (marketplace), and Clement's repast (banquet).

By the mid-twentieth century, commemorative practices increasingly focused on individual figures—primarily Cyril, Methodius, and Clement—while the other saints remained in the cultural periphery. This deprived the group of multimedia complexity. They did not function as one but stayed in the cultural context as separate personalities. Thus, a specific centre of the group was formed (St. Constantine-Cyril of Thessaloniki, St. Methodius of Moravia, and St. Clement of Ohrid), and peripheral characters (St. Naum, St. Angelarius, St. Sava). The first acquired the status of normative, classical, while the second fell into the variability flow and could not build sustainable traits and become an example, a model. The peripheral characters were deprived of their profiles, thus becoming modalities of the central figures. The literary works that followed were a peculiar interpretive form not of National Revival texts but of depictions of the late Middle Ages, when the three saints Constantine-Cyril of Thessaloniki, Methodius of Moravia, and Clement of Ohrid were positioned in the centre of the sacred murals.

5. The Seven Slavic saints in modern dramaturgic interpretations

This was the case with Kiril Hristov's dramatic ballad "Свети Седмочисленици" (1941) [Seven Slavic Saints]. It was strongly influenced by the composition of the 1806 mural found in the St. Naum monastery (North Macedonia). The beginning of the dramatic action showed the statical frescoes that come to life and from décor transformed into personages, and from images into figures.

Thus, the dramaturgical action transformed them into central Bulgarian history and memory figures. The dramaturgical content was activated by identification mechanisms operating in the direction from image to word but also building a distance between them. Here, a visual separation between the sacred depiction of the figures and their popular manifestation was observed, or in Jan Assman's definition, "one of ritual repetition and one of textual interpretation" ([6], p. 80). The depiction performed the role of a "connective structure" ([6], p. 80), which bound these two manifestations and transformed the sacred structure from iconic to oral and from static (mural) into dynamic (drama).

The tendency to know the saints more from their depiction than through text was followed even during socialism in Bulgaria (1944–1989). Celebrations during that period were organised as government events attended by high-ranking officials, the government, and members of parliament ([42], p. 59). This expanded the borders and the identification knowledge by loading it with political and ideological signs.

Thus, the creation of secular and entirely atheistic institutional memory began—"the celebrations pass as a day of enlightenment, literature, and Orthodoxy as a national holiday" ([47], p. 121). This seemed to dismantle the cult into many smaller components that started to function independently and assigned new meanings: The "Day of enlightenment, literature, and Orthodoxy" was no longer connected only and exclusively to Cyril and Methodius and their disciples. It primarily emphasised embedding the written word and generally, the book in the ritual circulation of power, adding Orthodoxy to augment the ritual component. Objectifying the "textual continuity" ([6], p. 72) supported and affirmed ritual connectivity—between the religious and the institutional ritual.

Influenced by the end of World War II and the formation of the socialist bloc of countries, including Bulgaria, in the middle of the twentieth century, a renewal process started in dramaturgy. Undoubtedly, the drama was affected by the prescribed rules in writing stemming from socialist ideology [5]. At the same time, however, new genre conventions were increasingly emerging—dramas, plays, and plots. They occurred as part of the process of organising anniversaries and celebrations—in 1962, on the 1100th anniversary of the creation of the Slavic alphabet, and in 1968, on the 1100th anniversary since the consecration of the Slavic alphabet and the Cyrillic books by the Roman Pope Adrian II. These were the dramas *Когато светлината се раждаше* [When the Light Was Born] in 1963 and 1968 by Slav Hr. Karaslavov and *Единадесетата заповед* [The Eleventh Commandment] in 1963 and 1968 co-authored by N. Dragova and P. Stefanov.

The plot-organising motif in both was the adoption of Christianity, the creation of the Slavic alphabet, the public dispute with the trilinguists in Venice in 867, and the consecration of Slavic books by the Pope in Rome in 878. These dramas brought three new interpretative strategies primarily through prolific personage systems. Each character of the Seven Slavic Saints expressed a separate concept: Cyril and Methodius were the leaders filled with empathy, mercy, and wisdom [48]; Clement was a visionary, Naum was a devoted follower, Gorazd was a philosopher, and Angelarius and Sava were helpers. Along with the enlighteners, unconventional characters occurred whose function was directly linked to building a memory. One of them was the pagan priest Budimir, who also acted as a folk bard, thus combining oral and written memory into one common construct. This unconventional character represented the meeting of two different cultural codes—the religious and the pagan, the written and the oral. It carried out the "transposition of information", which in 1963 began to reformulate and recompose the elements of the collective memory of the event.

In almost two opposite directions led to the changes in the titles of the two works in 1968: *The Eleventh Commandment* was renamed, becoming *Heretics* [48], and *When the Light was Born* became *Братята от Солун* [*The Brothers from Thessaloniki*] [49].

The modification of Dragova and Stefanov's work interests the present study. The fact that the change of title was fictitious and deliberate is corroborated by the fact that the contents remained unchanged. The new wording secured a deceptive adherence to socialist rules: if a title like "*The Eleventh Commandment*" directly led to the canonical religious dimensions and presented the work of Cyril and Methodius as a massive contribution to the entire Slavic world, the new one—"Heretics", openly demonstrated a departure from the religious canon. It entirely opposed the mission of the Saints Heptaritmoi—they were canonised because of their exceptional contribution to the spread of Christianity. To comply with the new situation in Bulgaria after 1944, this context had to be erased and the characters' causality had to be rewritten.

The title "Heretics" created additional oppositions, some of which were acceptable to socialist ideology. The most well-known mediaeval heretical teaching in Bulgaria was the Bogomilism, which socialist culture exploited as a harbinger of revolutionary movements. This replacement marked something very significant in Bulgaria during the 1960s—the concurrence of canonical and noncanonical was, in fact, a competition between the notions of religious and atheist. Thus, the heretic was now perceived as a form of rebellion against the norm and in terms of society—in opposition to the feudal and, respectively, against the bourgeois and therefore the capitalist form of government. The reworked title gave freedom to the drama. Moreover, it protected the contents and preserved its authenticity regarding the historical context and the religious cult. This explained the presence of the lush Christian symbolics, the extreme complexity of the personage system, and the multilayered manifestations of the mysterious—from enigma to mystic reincarnations. The title gave intermediality to the work. By overcoming the ideological hurdles, the drama succeeded in changing the religious to atheistic expression without changing its figurativeness.

The intermedial models were realised using special verbal constructions to create heterogeneous artistic messages. Following the example of the ancient Greek tragedy, seven choruses were present in the "*Eleventh Commandment*," symbolising the ladder of spiritual growth. Each next chorus performed an ever more enigmatic, mystical, and ritual text than the previous, amplifying the climax of the concrete part of the dramaturgical action—the linguistic expression of the drama fully adhered to mediaeval literary speech and writing. In the dialogues, the audience quickly recognised the skilfully intertwined fragments of mediaeval texts—the hagiographies of Cyril, Methodius, and Clement; *За буквите* [*On the Letters*] by Chernorizets Hrabar; references to *Азбучна молитва* [*Alphabet Prayer*]; *Проглас към Евангелието* [*Proclamation to the Gospel*] et al.

Karaslavov's play *Братята от Солун* [*The Brothers from Thessaloniki*], in contrast to the play *The Eleventh Commandment*, steadfastly and unequivocally adhered to the canon of socialist realism. The plot was based on controversial hypotheses and actions contradicting the historical logic of the mediaeval era, thus permanently deforming the characters of the Saints Heptaritmoi group. A different type of intermedial construction of some of the characters was applied here—the disciples of Cyril and Methodius were presented as newcomers from outside the borders of the Slavic community. Still, being of Slav origin, they succumbed to the strong influence of the brothers from Thessalonica. This recreated the biblical motif of the sheep separated from the flock and its acceptance into the community. That is why the play carried an

extreme opposition between “foreign” and “own”, and the society-modelling cultural construct of “in” and “out.”

6. The ritual drama: Religious awakening

In 1978, through the drama *Похвално слово за словото* [A Praise to Word] by R. Radkov was accomplished a transmedial transposition from text to ritual, from literature to drama, and from the theatre stage to religious ritual space. The play was performed in the crypt of St. Alexander Nevsky Patriarchal Cathedral in Sofia. The event was institutionally supported—high-ranking personalities attended the premiere, and among them was the Chairwoman of the Committee of Culture, Lyudmila Zhivkova (the daughter of Todor Zhivkov, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and Chairman of the State Council of the People's Republic of Bulgaria).

The crypt had performed its innate role until 1965. Then, in congruence with the change of power in Bulgaria in 1944 and the political system's transition to socialist rule, it was converted into a Museum of Christian Art. Remodelled into an exhibition hall, it contained icons, church utensils, prints, manuscripts, and relics. The status change from religious to secular function manifests the desacralisation of space and material culture. The relics were transformed from sacred objects into social objects, thus changing their symbolic meaning from static to communicative.

If by this point, understanding had occurred quickly and unhindered through the intermedial transfer of a sacred image into a literary word, after 1978 Radkov's drama again turned the process over and succeeded in constructing a sacred dramaturgical narrative that “re-consecrates” the word and gives it a new meaning. Thus, “Each new medium, communicates by transforming multimodal experiences, conforming a novel phase of practices as well as associated creative industries with their mechanisms of circulation, discussion forums and distribution” [50].

The transmedial transposition of secular theatre into a religious ritual space changed the viewpoints of both theatre and religion. This was a cue that in Bulgarian society of the 1970s and 1980s, profound processes of disruption of the atheistic model had started. The activated ideological rules of socialist realism in art were slowly but irreversibly changing, and the described dramaturgical attempts testify to the processes of deconstruction of the canon. Thus, the transmedial connections actively supported the change of the ideological meanings on the account of the religious. This neo-religious model was far from authentic; it was building up on noncanonical religious concepts, thus mixing parabiblical and heretical notions, undiscernible by the secondary modelling of religiosity in Bulgaria in the twentieth century.

The drama “A Praise to Word” (1978) by R. Radkov revealed a specific intermedial transposition between the arts: “a synthesis of recitation, theatre and ballet” ([51], p. 245). Theatre was the media agent. The same production was shown in the Vatican in 1985 in the presence of Pope John Paul II, thus testifying to not only a continuous but a more complex transmedial model. The stage production in one of the religious capitals, the Vatican, made possible the creation of connections between the mediaeval plot and the modern theatre, between Bulgarian, regional, and European; between East Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism; and between socialism and democracy. All these opened new possibilities, and the drama outgrew not only the text and the theatre space but also its political resonance (through the convergence of

ideological opposites). It started to function socially as a reformative mechanism in building a new social community.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of the St. Heptaritmoi saints across different media follows three distinct phases, each marking a transformation in their symbolic and social functions: first, from sacred mural to literary text; second, from literary text to theatrical performance; and third, from theatrical performance to ritual space. These transmedial processes, rather than being linear, operate as interwoven layers that reflect shifting political, social, and religious dynamics. The first transmedial process goes from sacred mural to text, the second from text to the theatre stage, and the third is the transfer from the stage to a ritual space. The transformation is not a roundabout because if the frescoes are an ingression, an infiltration of images into the sacred, the theatre production is a transgression, a transposition of characters through breaking the system's limits.

Thus, the debate between the arts turned into a discussion about the social and political conditions and the presence of the Divine in the community perceptions. Society succeeded in building its identity through the aesthetic system of the sublime by repositioning the saints' images in the sacred space and its notions of high and low, the heavenly and the earthly. For example, the earliest frescoes of 1612 in terms of temple architecture were positioned in the first row, straight above the socle, while the later ones, of 1744, were mounted at the entrance, close to the church's vault.

The theatrical production in the temple's sacred space had the same effect—it was not only speech, nor only an act or ritual; it was all three at once. In their transmedial expression, continuity processes stood out, especially concerning the transposition of the figures from pictorial to verbal and verbal to theatre, when various symbolic and aesthetic figures were presented in the framework of the same art. The process of simultaneity led to stronger intermedial connections within the dramaturgic genres, between the religious forms of canonical and noncanonical knowledge, between theatre and religion, and between verbal and ritual.

This transmedial evolution highlights how artistic reinterpretations of sacred figures were not only aesthetic but also deeply political. In socialist Bulgaria, these adaptations both conformed to and subtly resisted ideological constraints, preserving religious symbolism within state-sanctioned cultural production. Ultimately, the simultaneous presence of pictorial, verbal, theatrical, and ritual elements in the depiction of the Seven Slavic Saints underscores the resilience of sacred narratives in the face of ideological change. By traversing artistic and political boundaries, these transmedial adaptations did not merely preserve religious heritage; they actively redefined its place in cultural memory, ensuring its continued relevance in new historical contexts.

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Contemporary Ecopoems Reimagine What the ‘Literary Landscape’ Is

Peter Schmidt

Abstract

The ancient belief that landscape is more than geography is embodied in the concept of a “genius loci,” “the spirit(s) of the place.” What happens to “nature poetry” if the connection between landscapes and deities decays? Especially if that decay is caused by humans, and nature becomes soiled by the atrocities of history? We do not have *genius loci* now, but rather *genocide loci*. How can poetry address that? *Ecopoesía* as a term appears to have been a major presence in the Spanish-speaking world approximately a decade or so *earlier* than its English equivalent became familiar. I present three hypotheses about how some contemporary ecopoetry is evolving, focusing on the work of three poets: A. R. Ammons, Jane Hirshfield, and Mayra Santos-Febres.

Keywords: ecopoetry, landscape, poetry, nature, literature, Wordsworth, Parra, Vicuña, Ammons, Hirshfield, Santos-Febres, Glissant, Anthropocene

1. Introduction

The ancient belief that a landscape is more than geography is embodied in the concept of a “genius loci,” which means “the spirit(s) of the place.” John Dixon Hunt [1] notes that the term “was coined and widely used by the Romans, applied to their temples, streets, houses and topographical features such as rivers, springs or mountains. It alluded to the presence of deities and/or famous ancestors who now people these places, where they might be worshipped, thus giving meaning to the localities” (8).¹

¹ Hunt [1] cites Susan Stewart’s *The Ruins Lesson* [2] as complementary to his study. Stewart surveys meditations on ruins, not poems and works of art about wild landscapes, gardens, or homes. Despite decay, these ruins are full of animating presences. It’s the contrast between the decay of mortal things and immortal gods inhabiting those things that provides poetry with its sweet melancholia. Nonetheless, Stewart sees key distinctions:

[1] In ancient Egypt, ruins poems often were performative, expressing a resolve to repair and renew fallen tombs and monuments; Anglo-Saxon ruins poems, in contrast, conveyed a sense of mystified awe and curiosity regarding the engineering feats of what their authors imagined were a vanished race of giants. And from the late medieval period forward, Christian visual art and poetry addressed so-called pagan ruins by transposing and rededicating them to a new religion. (3)

What happens to the genius loci motif if it's used in ecopoetry influenced by the Anthropocene and climate change? Many poets have written nature poems in a world altered by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) [3]. Some continue the Wordsworthian plot of using nature as a balm or counter to the corruptions of modernity, as with Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things" [4]. Others seek to find ways in which the lyric must come to terms with the poisonous effects that Carson chronicled.² Carson's book gained a global readership because she exposed how ecosystems were being poisoned by commercial insecticides meant to boost human food crops and protect against diseases like malaria. Influenced by Marx and their knowledge of colonialism, Latin American poets pushed an even broader critique: under-regulated capitalism treated entire landscapes and the beings living within them as killable or exploitable—all in the name of progress and protecting human prosperity. The harm they were doing extended far beyond the marketing of pesticides. Latin American poets understood poetry and the other arts to be a vital part of the resistance against industrial modernity and its consequences. Further, *ecopoesía* as a term was a major presence in the Spanish-speaking world approximately a decade or so *earlier* than its English equivalent became familiar.³

² DDT was widely adopted globally after World War II as a pesticide, but also to attack the causes of typhus and malaria. Over a billion tons of the chemical were used in the 30 years prior to its ban in the 1960s. See this EPA webpage: <https://www.epa.gov/archive/epa/aboutepa/ddt-regulatory-history-brief-survey-1975.html>. Wikipedia has a succinct history of why the pesticide industry's attacks on Carson backfired: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Spring. Accessed November 19, 2024.

³ A book needs to be written giving us a comparative history of ecopoetry in the Americas (South, Central, North, and the Caribbean)—with an emphasis not on who did what first, but on what developments were most important, and how to compare and contrast them.

On *ecopoesía* vs. *ecopoetry*, see Google's n-gram viewer, which shows that a sharp rise in use among English speakers occurred in the late 1990s, more than a decade after the publication of Parra's *Ecopoemas* [5]. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=ecopoetry&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3 (English) compared to https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=ecopoesía&year_start=1800&year_end=2022&corpus=es&smoothing=3 (Spanish).

In 1978, William Rueckert [6] introduced and defended the term *ecocriticism*, and stressed poetry's important role during ecological and planetary crises. Other coinages involving the prefix *eco* besides *ecocriticism* were used in the early 1970s: see Kvaløy [7].

Regarding Latin American developments, see [5, 8, 9]. On Parra's evolution, see also [10]. For Cecilia Vicuña's pioneering poems and projects, the bilingual compilation by Acalá [11] is the best available. See also the Vicuña interview by Skinner [12]. As editor of *ecopoetics*, Skinner should receive a great deal of credit for prodding Anglo poets and Anglo ecopoetics to pay attention to developments in Latin America. He gave his Vicuña interview a prominent place in the first issue of the first journal in the English-speaking Americas devoted to ecopoetics.

My hypothesis about Latin America's importance for the history of ecopoetry should not be taken to ignore the prominent role that the Beat poets, especially Gary Snyder, and anthologies, such as Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968) [13], played in recognizing poetic innovations beyond the Western and English-speaking world, as well as the ways in which capitalism's endless appetites were endangering peoples, cultures, and the planet itself. Rothenberg's critique of the term "primitive" and his compendium of creation stories and other poetic forms began, he said, "out of a pair of 1964 readings of 'primitive and archaic poetry' at The Poet's Hardware Theater & The Café Metro in New York" ([13], p. xxiv). Poets Jackson Mac Low, David Antin, and Rochelle Owens were also organizers and participants. Venezuela offers yet another example of how *global* extinction protests were in the wake of *Silent Spring*.

If the connection between landscapes and deities in “nature poetry” decays, what follows? Especially if that decay is caused by humans, and nature becomes soiled by the atrocities of history? Such questions suggest that the venerable concept of the spirit of a place has not died a natural death. It’s been poisoned. We do not have *genius loci* now, but rather *genocide loci*. How can poetry address that?

I present three hypotheses about how some contemporary poetry is evolving to meet such a challenge. Many ecopoems do at least one of these things. The ambitious ones attempt all three.

1. Contemporary nature poems now have to deal with rage, grief, guilt, and denial; they have to undo our defense mechanisms and then give shape and voice to frightening emotions.
2. Instead of an epiphany at the poem’s end, readers experience the opposite of closure. That is, we are pushed to accept imperfect cures, uncertainty, contingency, complicity. The poems give us precarity, not what Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” called “recompense.” That’s the way we live now, and the poems demand we face such difficult truths. If we are to be effective in fighting to lessen toxic behavior making the Anthropocene worse, we have to accept such hard truths. The poems are there to keep us from being delusional. They stage reckonings.
3. Ecopoems may also *revivify* ancient beliefs in a *genius loci*. They show us their powers are even more needed as we contemplate past or future extinctions. However, many contemporary ecopoems do not just associate *genius loci* with Roman poetry or Western literary tradition; they focus on *other* literary landscapes too. Indigenous traditions all over the globe understand that the world humans live within is filled with living beings and their voices, including many who are not human or are the spirits of human ancestors. The task of the new *genius loci* ecopoetry is like a ceremony: it is to reconnect us to these spirit presences as a partial cure for the ruins we have made.

If hypotheses 1 and 2 deal with the terrors of absence, hypothesis 3 shows how poems try to heal a broken world. But my caveat in #2 applies to all: responsible poems aren’t miracle cures. What they give us is a way to make a humble, small repair in our relations with other beings. Contemporary ecopoems, like ecosystems, filter pollutants and seek to convert them into something less harmful, perhaps even fecund.

This essay surveys telling examples drawn from the work of the following poets: A. R. Ammons [15, 16], Jane Hirshfield [17, 18], and Mayra Santos-Febres [19]. The last two are contemporary; Ammons provides some context and contrast regarding what an influential ecopoem could attempt before *Silent Spring*.

A group of rebellious 1960s artists and writers called themselves El Techno de la Ballena, “the technology of the whale.” *Ballena* is the generic name for whales in Spanish, but of course only some species of whales have baleen, the filtering mechanism in their mouths that allows those whales to feed on plankton and other minute creatures, unlike (say) Sperm whales. El Techno hoped to channel the whales’ anger against what was being done to inspire uprisings against capitalism and political repression. I recommend an essay by Moncada [14] on the El Techno group in its historical context, part of an anthology of their work he has compiled. Moncada describes his project as follows: “Es la más completa de todas las compendiadas hasta la fecha. Incluye libros enteros y materiales de inigualada importancia y de difícil acceso.”

1.1 A. R. Ammons: Romantic echoes and the ecological sublime

Like Wordsworth, Ammons began his career writing poems featuring the poet meditating within a specific landscape, often while walking through it. He did what Wordsworth did in “Tintern Abbey”: he turned to nature as a source of healing, but also as storehouse of tropes for understanding the imagination’s powers. An iconic early poem written in the early 1960s, “Corsons Inlet” [16] (147–151), explores the Wordsworthian premise that encountering wilderness transforms human consciousness for the better. But Ammons’ valuation of nature is not Wordsworth’s; he has an understanding influenced by the rise of twentieth-century ecological science, which studied threats to ecosystems and how they evolve. Instead of encountering a single spirit that “rolls through all things,” as Wordsworth described it, Ammons on his walk through the dune ecosystem in New Jersey’s Corsons Inlet State Park in the U.S. was enthralled by the biome’s web of many different kinds of beings living and dying. His wilderness poem takes place in a “natural” area maintained by the state, and it is both populated and ever-changing in ways that Wordsworth’s landscapes rarely are.⁴

“Corsons Inlet” allows us to define an essential way in which Ammons departed from Wordsworth and other Romantics, including Whitman, even as he paid homage to them. In the dunescape he encounters not a single sacred presence, a genius loci, as in Wordsworth, but a profound *displacement* of all the techniques he thought would help him see and map a landscape. The ecosystem seethes with motion at both minute and large scales:

swerves of action
like the inlet’s cutting edge:
there are dunes of motion,
organizations of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance
in the overall wandering of mirroring mind:

but Overall is beyond me (148)

⁴ By the 1990s, Ammons’ work had taken a darker turn. *Garbage* (1993) [15], his best long poem, is constantly aware of how humans have desecrated the world. This mourning partakes of Wordsworth’s, but is more acute because capitalism’s refuse is now global. “I have to start// again from a realization of failure” (56): Ammons struggles with the question of whether poems can ever mitigate the garbage “civilization” generates. Further, he understands the devastation to be linguistic as well as ecological. Impoverished language and imagination are implicated in ecocide. A poem should *show* us our “embranglements” (56: a nonce word mixing *entangle* and *brangle*, the latter British slang formed from *brawl* and *wrangle*, meaning squabble or fight). *Garbage* is a moving attempt to work that problem out. Still, poetic tropes throughout *Garbage* also seek to be a counter-force, revivifying both landscapes and human possibility. Look at these marvelous lines whose poetic twists and turns do more than just describe a skateboarder’s aerial tricks called “air.” Each of Ammons’ line-breaks here is a “rim” from which the poem gets “air”—a nice pun on “inspiration.”

I can think of nothing I’d
rather do than think of skateboard loops out

of skateboard bowls, the various designs in the
momenta: the rising up in rounds over the rims. (73)

Garbage is a great poem not just because it chronicles our mess, but also because it shows us how to brangle.

"Mirroring mind" is Wordsworth-worthy, but Ammons stresses how a healthy ecosystem embodies both order and entropy in motion, thus troubling humans' fondness for geometrical forms and hierarchies: "I was released from forms,/ from the perpendiculars,/ straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/ of thought/ into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends/of sight" (148). Unpredictable enjambments and irregular spacings mirror the dune landscape's mobile complexities, its refusals to reveal a Wordsworthian "Overall," an ideal order. (Recall "Tintern Abbey": "In nature ... /The anchor of my purest thoughts.") Instead, "overall" becomes an *adjective* for "wandering" in the dunes—and thus both the opposite of stasis and a comic pun ("over all").

Even the poem's syntax and line-breaks delight in unpredictable wandering within the park's space. Ammons' trademark colons join complete sentences one to the next, creating a long mega-sentence with no part designated as subordinate or superior to others (sort of like Walt Whitman's catalog rhetoric). The line-breaks are irregular and unpredictable; the poet puts his "lines" on a printed page, even though he says he has "drawn no lines" in mapping the dunes. But his lines' breaks (and even their placement on the page) are thrillingly random. To read, we must "wander" too and learn to enjoy "disorder" cycling sublimely within a great order.

Yet note that Ammons' nature, though constantly in motion and including aleatory elements, is treated as pristine, unpolluted. There's no trash in the poem, nor even footprints, though certainly Death is in this Arcadia: "risk is full: every living thing in/ siege: the demand is life, to keep life" (149). This is Ammons' own influential version of the Romantic sublime, updated for the Age of Ecology and complex systems theory. It's a portrait of what humans need to learn from a climax ecosystem—the final, stable stage in biodiversity for a given area. Its balanced equilibrium of species—its *many* *genii loci*—will give it utmost resistance to natural disasters like winter storms. "Corsons Inlet" is therefore not an Anthropocene poem because although its dune ecosystem and its creatures may undergo a constant "siege," it's the laws of nature at work.

1.2 Jane Hirshfield: Anthropocene poetics and existential reckonings

Now to two poems written in the twenty-first century, to explore my hypothesis that for many poets the Anthropocene has changed the poetic landscape. First Jane Hirshfield, then Mayra Santos-Febres. How does nature figure in their poems, and how do they use metaphors to confront the atrocities humans have done to each other, and to landscapes? Tellingly, they foreground how the troubles of "history" and "nature" mirror each other. Nature is no salve for history's poisons, as it sometimes is in Wordsworth and Ammons. Human crises seep into everything, leaving their traces in deserts and oceans. The poems help us read those marks and, by doing so, give us a different mission.

Jane Hirshfield is rightly recognized as one of the premier ecopoets working in the U.S. today. I'd like to present a recent poem of hers, "Mosses," that was first published in 2022 in an issue of *Scientific American* [17].⁵ Inspired by a single sentence—"In the

⁵ Hirshfield's poem was first published in *Scientific American* in 2022 [17]. See also *Ledger: Poems* (2020) [18]. That book's title accurately suggests Hirshfield's project of weighing humankind's Anthropocene debts and liabilities. Interestingly, the journal somewhat regularly published poems as well as scientific papers when it was founded in 1845. But poems soon vanished from the journal. The journal's tradition of publishing poetry was revised, however, during the Covid crisis in 2020: see [20].

Mojave Desert, a translucent crystal offers bryophytes much-needed respite from the heat of the sun”—from a science article in *The New York Times*, Hirshfield’s poem is an instance of the valuable cross-pollination that can occur between science and poetry. Its opening stanzas:

For hypolithic mosses,
it seems,
four percent of daylight is right.
They live, the headline says,
by sheltering
under a parasol of translucent quartz.

The crystal scatters
the light’s ultraviolet,
dilutes its heat,
traps the night’s condensed moisture
to moss-sized rain.

Moss in a desert? A living being aided by nonliving quartz? Facts mixed with poetic metaphors like “parasol”? Yes, these conjunctions are real. The focus is on shelter and adaptations for survival. But two words, *seems* and then *parasol*, introduce fanciful elements. *Seems* poses a testable hypothesis. *Parasol* offers a metaphor suggesting that what’s practical can also be highly stylish, even beautiful—though of course the word’s roots mean “protecting against the sun.”

The final stanzas meditate on the larger implications of this stone-and-mosses arrangement. Hirshfield posits that we humans need shelter too, from our “self-made Mojaves”—the ongoing desertification of much of the Earth caused by our Anthropocene. (“Self-made” also suggests desiccation within us, in our minds). We are both arrogant and impoverished creatures, “Unable to bear the full brightness,/ the full seeing/ [...] / An experiment not meant to last.” “To the implausible green of existence” of life on Earth, Hirshfield concludes, we have offered merely our “four percent portion of praises” and “comprehension.” We cannot fully *see* and acknowledge what we have done and are doing to the planet. On that note the poem ambiguously ends, suggesting both hope and despair. Perhaps our “shelter” helps us not be roasted by despair, so that we can craft solutions to the climate crisis? But the opposite reading is only too plausible. Maybe neither flawed liberal democracies nor authoritarian governments will be able to reduce greenhouse gases and other pollutants. Our profiteering, profligacy, and procrastination have generated an ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction, and humanity itself may eventually wither within the shelters we thought might save us.

Hirshfield’s is a new kind of landscape poem adapted to the Anthropocene’s climate of fire and foreboding. Verbally elegant and exact, “Mosses” also exemplifies curiosity: reading it, we imagine bending down to see a miniature moist terrarium growing under a crystal. Yet for all the poem’s delicacies, the cold clarity of its conclusion is sinister, even inhuman. The poem forces us to *see* an apocalyptic vision of the possible end of humans on Earth. “For better, for worse,” the poem may not be able to spur humans to change. Despite the poet’s interaction with a moss-sized *genius loci*, Hirshfield offers us a way to change our lives, but cannot compel us to do so. Yet to change, we have first to *imagine* change. As Emily Dickinson said of her poems, “I dwell in Possibility” (#466).

1.3 Mayra Santos-Febres: Postcolonial ecologies and Caribbean voices

I've been thinking of this gathering, this collecting and reading toward a new analytic, as the wake and wake work, and I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence esthetically and materially.

... to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding. *To be* "in" the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way of theorizing, in/for/from what Frank Wilderson refers to as "stay[ing] in the hold of the ship." With each of those definitions of wake present throughout my text, I argue that rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* [21], (13–14)

Considering genius loci, we need to talk about seascapes as well as landscapes. I turn to a magnificent sequence of 20 odes invoking the dead and the displaced, *los muertos y los desplazados*: *Boat People* by Mayra Santos-Febres [19]. This book-length poem was published in Spanish in 2005 and translated into English by Vanessa Pérez-Rosario in 2021, in a bilingual edition.⁶ The poem commemorates all those refugees (including the enslaved) who have drowned in the Caribbean—or other waters. Below, I'll use the work of Glissant [22], Pérez-Rosario [19], and Sharpe [21] to contextualize how Santos-Febres personifies seascape using Afro-Caribbean orishas. Glissant and Pérez-Rosario help explain why Santos-Febres' poem calls out to the uncounted dead to map what Sharpe calls the "the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding." The poet provides the conduit for us to listen and connect their lives and the sea's memories with our own, so that we hear, feel, and understand that our lives are *in the wake* of the drowned.

Pérez-Rosario's astute afterword (75–80) describes Santos-Febres using a "cimarón poetics" that "resists legibility." It leaves us with "shards of image and sound that give rise to fertile and generative extraterritorial spaces":

In Caribbean poetry, the sea as a space of radical alterity is a recurring motif. African diasporic memory is deeply embedded in Santos-Febres's sea imagery—the illegal city at the bottom of the ocean, and the blankness and nothingness of open space. In Puerto Rican literature, Blackness is continually displaced and relocated to the water, foregrounding the sea's critical role as witness to the horrors of the Middle Passage. In *Boat People*, Santos-Febres describes new middle passages, the afterlives of slavery. Images of migration by boat carry with them a host of historical narratives of discovery and loss and of successful navigation and return; they capture the redefinition of identities in migration. (78–79)

⁶ Subsequent citations from Santos-Febres' *Boat People* [19] will be made parenthetically in the text. For an interview with Santos-Febres that includes reference to the Afro-Diasporic and Racial Studies Program she is setting up at the University of Puerto Rico, where she teaches, see Arlene Dávila, "'This is our time': Mayra Santos-Febres on Changing Narratives About Race Across the Americas." <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/interventions/mayra-santos-febres-on-changing-narratives-about-race-and-social-equity-across-the-americas>. Accessed: December 9, 2024.

Cimarrón means *wild* but also can refer to someone who has escaped enslavement, or their descendants. As Pérez-Rosario uses the term, it applies to any act of resistance that understands itself to be in the tradition of rebellions by the enslaved against a colonial system fueled by the immense profits generated by plantation slavery. Santos-Febres's boat people living the "afterlives of slavery" include refugees who have fled Caribbean islands that continue to be plagued by dictators, extreme economic disparities and debt, and climate disasters that cannot be properly called "natural." *Cimarrón* poetics may be applied to any literary writing that engages with such histories.⁷

Santos-Febres uses apostrophe (and, ironically, the language of diplomacy) to address and honor "all drowned Caribbean/ emissaries/ of middle passage nations" (65). Pérez-Rosario has translated these terms accurately, and we should not be deaf to the ironies circulating here. Those who lost their lives by drowning have been essentially erased from written records, both during slavery times and in our own, but now, via Santos-Febres's poem, their histories emerge from the sea. The poet hails them as important emissaries from an underwater *nation* and bestows upon these undocumented souls a *citizenship status* within this imagined community. Further, readers need to establish *relations* with these spirit fugitives, just as regular countries might. The benefits will not be economic or material, but spiritual. Santos-Febres has appropriated and reconfigured nationalist and diplomatic rhetoric for *cimarrón* purposes, so that language can voice tragic losses and ongoing struggles.

Such themes in the poem do not express themselves as a dour dirge or lecture. Santos-Febres's language *dances*—even as it gives us a mournful litany of the tragic consequences of escape attempts over many different centuries. That dissonance is central to the poem's mystery, and generates the siren-like allure of the voices the poem allows us to hear emerging from the water. I'm not sure if Santos-Febres knows the U.S. poet Robert Hayden's work. For me, *Boat People* is "in the wake" of poems like Hayden's "Runagate" and "Middle Passage." But there's no question that Santos-Febres honors past Black poetry while also adding her own eloquent new contributions to the combite:

consuls dance here in the ocean's deep
all drowned Caribbean
emissaries
of middle passage nations:
delegates from the Ivory Coast
...
dissidents of Trujillo of Batista Duvalier
...
fugitives in rowboats near St. Thomas
...

⁷ For another contemporary Boricua poet who deals incisively with the impossible debts of Puerto Rico and other islands generated by neoliberalist corporate capitalism, in conjunction with U.S.-based banks, the U.S. government, and the World Bank, see Raquel Salas Rivera's long poem *Lo Terciario/The Tertiary* [23]. The island government owed over \$70 billion in 2016. Salas Rivera uses Marx mixed with postcolonial theory and theories of intentional underdevelopment to diagnose, in poetry, the dynamics of debt-production, debt-circulation, and "derailed circulation." The book is also encoded with a counter-poetics, queer love poems mapping other kinds of circulation.

ex-slaves seeking to reach	the Guinea of their freedom.
consuls of all these islands	
dance twice-drowned	this is not the aegean (65; my elisions)

“Not the aegean sea”: Santos-Febres stresses by this phrase that she sees her poem in the tradition of Homer’s *Odyssey*, another poem about epic wanderings and near-death experiences. But with her word “not” and her lack of capitalization she also claims the right to transgress that tradition, reworking it in order to tell a story where the heroes do not have the possibility of returning to Ithaca and their aristocratic identities. In Deleuze’s and Guattari’s terms [24], this is a sign of minoritarian, dissident discourse. As Pérez-Rosario says, “The invisibility and fragility of these lives is echoed in formal aspects of the poems, which are written mostly in lowercase letters ... Their stories are untold, their names are not preserved” (76). Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is also relevant for *Boat People*. Both trace sea-changes in the bodies of the dead—not just their bones, but also their voices and the meanings of their lives as they haunt the living.

Santos-Febres’s allusions are not solely to European classics. Her poem is profoundly Afro-Caribbean. It’s in this context that we can see one way in which contemporary poetry is returning to and profoundly revising the genius loci motif. The “spirits of the place” are Afro-Caribbean female deities connected to water. But they also include the ghosts and voices of the many humans who drowned during forced migrations past and present. Santos-Febres expands the concept of genius loci to include a critique of colonialism, plantation slavery, and their toxic legacies extending into the present day. And the poet does so by using the most powerful rhetorical device associated with the ode form in lyric poetry, the apostrophe or direct address. The poem’s voice *calls out* to deities, the dead, and the living, creating a healing ceremonial space of mourning, testimony, remembrance, and dancing.

The imagined underwater necropolis for the drowned in *Boat People* is described as a *combite* (67), a Haitian creole term for doing heavy labor accompanied by a drumming ensemble and chants to keep workers in rhythm and provide encouragement.⁸ But now the meaning of both the task at hand and the purpose of the music has changed. Santos-Febres’ *combite* combines the living and the dead to shape a song of pain, wonder, and healing.

Two of the most important deities in Yoruban and Afro-Caribbean religious traditions are the water goddesses Oshun and Yemayá (also Yemoja and other spellings), spirits of fresh waters and the oceans, respectively. They are also goddesses of fertility and abundance. In addition, Yemayá is the mother of all the other orishas. She definitely appears in *Boat People*, but I would argue—given the importance of Oshun in West Africa and the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico—that Oshun is invoked too. These water spirits have fluid boundaries and are often portrayed together. See **Figures 1–3.**⁹ Yemayá’s dominant color is blue, Oshun’s gold.

Yemayá, and perhaps Oshun, are referenced in *Boat People*, Section 20, in the third person:

⁸ “Combite”: Merriam-Webster.com. *Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/combite>. Accessed: August 12, 2022.

⁹ These images are in the public domain. The web abounds with images and stories portraying these orishas.



Figure 1.
Oshun on the left, Yemayá on the right.



Figure 2.
Yemayá.

the consuls know the sea is a woman
who devours I mean welcomes and always offers
room for more
she is home to whatever never ceases to have its fill



Figure 3.
Oshun.

it's the reason for the call
 for the infinite bridge of bodies
 falling
 ...
 insatiable sea
 morenito
 it's why the old consuls dance.
 the dance summons the hunger necessary
 for new bodies to emigrate
 to this water's house. (69; my ellipses)

This passage is filled with tension and fear: note the shift back and forth from portraying the sea as an insatiable devourer of souls to a loving and forgiving deity who gives the drowned a home. *Morenito* is a term of affection (the diminutive of *moreno*, dark-haired and dark-skinned); it's masculine in this context because it modifies *el mar*, the sea, and also perhaps plays with Homer's famous epithet "wine-dark sea." Note also how, at this moment in the poem when *morenito* is used, the poem's voice shifts to direct address and a more affectionate tone: it's now calling out to Yemayá/Oshun, seeking to honor her and the hospitality she gave to the drowned.

By the last stanzas of Section 20, the apostrophe shifts again. Now Yemayá/Oshun speaks. The poem has opened itself to her powers and become possessed—just as the refugees it honors were absorbed by the sea. The presence of these water spirits' song is strong. The poem's "we" now includes both the poem's original voice and Oshun's/Yemayá's, and *morenito* refers tenderly to the sea, the sea's dead, and the living humans who need to hear this song in order to be changed by a new understanding of the depths of Afro-Caribbean history:

far-flung we plunge yearning
 following the rhythm of the waves
 the beat of a whispering voice

...
there's no hunger down here
and the dance never ends
all is supple
and inviting
it's a question of letting go
 let go completely
see yourself become a drop
of fish sweat suddenly
swept up by a seagull
a distant green reminiscent of the land
to which you never thought you'd return.

this is your home morenito
come let me embrace you
at last you are with me
at last I can stop bewitching you. (71–73; my ellipses)

The cimarrón sublime, as Pérez-Rosario stressed, is experienced as both terror and healing. It's about confronting history, but also how *not* to let that history devour you. So too the moment of “letting go” in spirit-possession in vodun ceremonies, when individual identity connects to and is infused by a deity and one's dead ancestors. The resounding ending of Santos-Febres's cycle of odes in *Boat People* mourns the deceased but also provides a refuge for the refugees—in *us*, not just in underwater catacombs. The poem seeks to transfer their stories and songs and ghosts into our memories, so that the lost are recovered and embraced, “rich and strange.”

To close this discussion of Santos-Febres, I stress the relevance of the Martinican author Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990) [22] to my thesis that some contemporary ecopoetry about landscapes and seascapes understands that the origin of the Anthropocene lies not in the 1950s, but in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries and the global transformations wrought by slavery and colonialism.¹⁰ His book sought to be prophetic, not just to diagnose the past. He rightly claimed as his purview the literatures of the Americas, not only the Caribbean or the francophone world. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* [21] is one of many contemporary authors influenced by Glissant.

Of the many lines of possible connection between *Boat People* and Glissant, I would particularly stress the importance of these four:

- Glissant's analysis of a poetics of creolization and *marronage* (the French version of what Santos-Febres calls cimarrón);
- his defense of *opacity* as a method and a right in postslavery writing;
- his definition of an equitable poetics of Relation, not one deploying hierarchy; and

¹⁰ The French original of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* was published in 1990 by Gallimard; Wing's English translation [22] dates from 1997.

- Glissant's opening disquisition in *Poetics of Relation*—or is it better called a prose poem?—on the sea, the drowned victims of slavery and other oppressions, and the abyss of history.

Regarding apostrophes to the dead and to the Ocean itself in *Boat People*, attend to the following passages from Glissant's "The Open Boat" about slave ships and the Middle Passage. It's arguably relevant not just for Santos-Febres's work, but for all stories about refugees making dangerous journeys to escape political violence, climate change, economic disaster, or some ghastly combination of all three:

the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death.

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea ... still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains ... [T]he entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (6)

We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone. (9)

2. Conclusions

Remember my hypotheses about Anthropocene ecopoetry from the introduction. The task of the best ecopoetry is like that of a ceremony: it seeks to reconnect us to spirit presences in the earth, air, and water as a partial cure for the ruins we have made. Ammons walks through a natural world not just full of beings living, dying, and interconnected, nor just one constantly in motion, but into a post-Euclidian and post-Newtonian universe where change is not entirely predictable. Geometry can no longer measure what the poet sees, and struggle and danger dominate. It's a landscape of precarity, in which the poet's old ways of understanding have been undone in the 1950s and early 1960s by the new science of ecology, which studies systems seeking equilibrium but dealing with sudden change as a constant. We could call Ammons' "Corsons Inlet" a contemporary instance of the Romantic Sublime, which is defined by the thrill of danger and unknowability. But Ammons' experience is perhaps more accurately dubbed an Ecosystemic Sublime. That is, he finds his older ways of knowing "order" and "form" in nature to have been challenged and then altered. Unlike some of Ammons' later work, however, "Corsons Inlet" is pre-Anthropocene, blissfully without knowledge that its model of biodiversity teeters at the edge of an abyss.

Hirshfield's poem is a stellar example supporting hypothesis 1, about grief, rage, and denial, and hypothesis 2, that contemporary ecopoems often end ambiguously, with a reckoning, not a resolution; mixed emotions rather than catharsis. Her poem's voice is rather scathing, somewhat like an Old Testament prophet, of the storms of denial that

greet evidence that Anthropocene disaster is real. When in a science journal Hirshfield encountered an instance of adaptive survival, mosses taking advantage of minute quartz overhangs in the middle of a desert, she used her language skills to make us feel not as if we are reading a summary of a scientific paper, but as if we too are exploring the terrain, down on our knees as a mini terrarium, a hidden microsystem, is revealed beneath our boot-soles. Those mosses have news we need to hear.

Hirshfield's ending gives us less an conclusion than a roil of doubt about whether humans will change their behaviors before it's too late. The poem both presents a tiny model of how a species can adapt to global heating—and reasons for us to doubt that humans will pay attention. The poem's skepticism seems even more prescient after 2024 than when it was originally published just a few years ago. However, the mosses remain an instance of how "genius" can be located in landscape. The poem gives us a lens with which to see them. Perhaps we may also realize how intelligently mosses have adapted, and be willing to listen to their message? "Mosses" offers itself to us in that slim hope. It's both a magnifying glass and a telescope focused on the future; both a jeremiad and a prayer.

The sea that's addressed in Santos-Febres' *Boat People* is an even stronger instance than Hirshfield's of a poem that supports my third hypothesis: ecopoems have a vision of both landscape and history filled with the ghosts of those who did not die a natural death. Her poem is packed with nightmares, filled with ghosts in ways that Hirshfield's desert and Ammons' state park are not. Its puertorriqueña author makes sure readers have to face atrocities connected with the Anthropocene's connection to slavery and colonialism. *Boat People* swirls with the spirits of the once-enslaved, as well as drowned migrants and refugees from varied twentieth-century Caribbean dictators. *Genocide loci*, as I noted earlier—or, in the language of Glissant, the ecopoem as womb-abyss and death-dive.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? How can we survive this kind of encounter? Santos-Febres provides a difficult but courageous answer. By calling forth into her poem's imagined space African diaspora (cimarrón) gods associated with freshwater and the sea—and with rebirth, not just death—*Boat People* offers readers living in the Anthropocene the counter-rituals of remembrance and healing. We may call on those spirits and their ceremonies, and the moving litany of voices that the poem gives us, to help us in our current struggles. Santos-Febres's kind of ecopoem requires that we accept what many now recognize: the Anthropocene began far earlier than the 1950s, those recent decades when climate heating is accelerating in intensity. Its origins, unfortunately, lie with the global changes driven by capitalism and colonialism from 1492 on, which brought painful upheavals both to landscapes and to much of humanity. Their deaths on land and at sea—and the smoke from fires set in plantation slavery's sugar-cane fields—still linger, metaphorically speaking, in our air and water, polluting and haunting our present.

Those "open boats" about which Glissant wrote so eloquently: we are all in them now.

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Exploring Spiritual Aspects between *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible: An Intertextual Investigation

James Seanego

Abstract

Literary authors read other texts before they produce their own. This artistic phenomenon has been prevalent for a long time, and numerous literary critics worldwide have conducted research on it. This chapter centres on the idea that no text exists in isolation. It looks at an intertextual relationship between the three texts, O.K. Matsepe's *Mahlatse a Madimabe* (1981), John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and the *Bible*. Matsepe is a South African novelist who wrote in Sepedi. The chapter compares his sunset novel with Bunyan's spiritual text as well as the holy Bible. Using qualitative methods of research, the study employs Julia Kristeva's intertextual theory, which postulates that there is no original text; all texts are the repetition of other texts produced before. Thus, the argument suggests that both *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible influenced Matsepe's text. Findings demonstrate that dreams champion the spiritual journeys narrated in both Matsepe and Bunyan's texts, acknowledging the Bible as the major source shaping Matsepe's themes. It is further shown that literary texts are artistic creations, and one can only trace and comprehend their meanings by reading other sources (texts) and human situations.

Keywords: intertextuality, text, literature, spirituality, dreams, art, originality, meaning, influence

1. Introduction

This intertextual research chapter was established after the researcher's critical reading of the voluminous Sepedi novel, *Mahlatse a Madimabe* [1], translated as *Blissful Sorrow*, authored by a South African novelist, Oliver Kgadime Matsepe. Reading the novel with a critical textual lens, the researcher observed that the novel is not really 'original.' Therefore, the researcher associated this text with two other texts: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* [2] and the Bible [3]. It is evident from a thorough reading of these three texts that the writer of the former text, *Mahlatse a Madimabe*,

read from both Bunyan and Bible discourses prior to writing his novel. *Mahlatse a Madimabe* exhibits a multitude of literary, spiritual, linguistic, and thematic features observed in the two latter texts. The claim made in this literary investigation, that Matsepe's novel is not really 'original,' will be substantiated by a textual analysis of characterisation and themes from both texts. This paper argues that *Mahlatse a Madimabe* has thematically leaned on the two aforementioned texts. Mokgoatšana [4] rightfully states that the meaning of text is built on the meaning of the previous texts. He further stresses that artists cannot produce new things without referring to existing ones. Similarly, Moyise [5] asserts that no text exists in isolation, and, in contrast to structuralist theory, we cannot understand it in isolation. This implies that the understanding of a new text primarily depends on the meaning of pre-existing texts, often influenced by life circumstances. Thus, it appears that existing texts and the status quo influence new writers to produce texts that resonate with their intended audience.

Many artworks have always been influenced by life experiences. Artists, whether in literary or other artistic genres, have always been reflecting their productions based on life experiences. Not every artist can claim to be original in this manner. Life encounters and societal observations shape their worldviews and thereafter reproduce them as works of art. Artists are influenced by real-life occurrences to produce their works. Schein [6] enhances these views when he says that artists are the relevant elements of the society and that many of their exercises are applicable to human situations. Gaztambide-fernández [7] views artists as agents who are playing an active role in the society. This suggests that artists are inseparable from the society. Artists serve as beneficial parasites within communities. However, this study does not view Matsepe as a parasite writer, but rather as an influential writer who purposefully employed his artistic skills to mimic other texts, specifically Bunyan and the Bible. The reason for this is that Matsepe wrote several novels and poetry anthologies independently, without relying on other texts. The present researcher is fortunate to have gained a comprehensive understanding of the original sources that shaped this sampled novel, particularly considering the publication date of its first influencer, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. To substantiate this opinion, Mokgoatšana [4] correctly attests the following:

If intertextuality has to do with the digging of origins, the endeavour will have no convincing end. Although certain ideas can be traced from other sources, it is not easy to trace the original source of the so-called original source. Not everything is traceable to a common source or pool; hence the existence of originality—the origin of origin, is unfathomable.

This critical intertextual study appears to trace what the above citation refers to as the "originarity" of Matsepe's novel. Rigorous efforts were made in the discussions to reveal the 'originarity' sources of Matsepe's sunset and imaginative narrative.

2. Theoretical framework

Julia Kristeva's intertextual theory, which asserts that no text is original, serves as the sole foundation for this study. The theory simply maintains that texts are constructed from other texts. Alfaro [8], in the same view, states that there is a text within a text. This means that there is always a stale relationship between texts, whether directly or indirectly. Hence, Mokgoatšana [4] has this to say:

In societies where the spoken word is still the greatest medium of thought and dissemination of ideas, the artists are likely to allude unconsciously to incidents and phrases which have made a remarkable impact on their lives.

Plottel and Charney [9] posit that every text is an absorption and transformation of another text. This suggests that new texts are the continuation of the previously related texts that influenced them. Moyise [5] bolsters this perspective by asserting that the meaning of a text remains flexible, subject to revision as new texts emerge and redefine it. "Reposition it" implies that the meaning of a new text should align with contemporary living trends. Thus, intertextuality enables the revision of texts to better suit the concerned generation at the time of publication. Mokgoatšana [4] contends that although an understanding of the 'original' source is important, the new context dictates the meaning that the reference should carry. He further acknowledges that a juxtaposition of contexts breeds a new meaning that the earlier source could not produce. This underscores the significance of creating a new text based on an existing one. Altogether, the meanings of both old and new text grant readers the opportunity to understand both contexts in which both writers lived. In addition to what Kristeva advocates as the relation of texts, Gerard Genette with his transtextuality concept advises readers to critically engage with earlier texts in order to successfully interpret the latter text [10]. This means that the activity of a thorough reading of the influencing text is of paramount importance in an attempt to undertake an intertextual investigation. As such, a reader response theory which recognises the reader's significant role in building textual meaning is also handful. More than the content of the text, the reader's perception in constructing text meaning is not overlooked.

For this study, intertextual perspective guided the researcher in a way that he was able to compare *Mahlatse a Madimabe* with both *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible. Using this theory, the researcher found characters in both Matsepe and Bunyan's texts to be easily comparable. The theory was further useful in contextualising the application of biblical verses as observed in *Mahlatse a Madimabe*.

3. Methodology

This research chapter is qualitative in nature, rather than quantitative. Polkinghorne [11] asserts that qualitative data primarily takes the form of spoken or written language, not numerical values. Qualitative research further deals with the textual analysis of data. In this study, the researcher opted for this research approach because of the eagerness to understand the contents of the three literary yet spiritual texts. Such understanding reached its maximum point through intertextual analysis of the texts.

This study specifically used a purposive technique for data sampling. Bertram and Christiansen [12] defines purposive sampling as the deliberate selection of a sample for a specific purpose. The researcher purposively sampled the three texts, *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible, observing a tight intertextual parallel between them. Therefore, it was imperative to engage in an intertextual reading of these texts.

Data were collected using a document analysis method. Wach and Ward [13] define this research method as "systematically analysing the contents of written documents." The three aforementioned texts serve as the primary sources, while

secondary sources emanated from dissertations, theses, journal articles, and literary and scholarly books. These secondary sources support and substantiate claims made in the analysis of this study.

The researcher analysed the accumulated data through a thematic lens. The researcher conducted a thorough reading of the three texts, which aided in categorising themes and characterisation from an intertextual perspective.

4. Presentation of results

The study's conceptualisation emphasises that literary writers, as artists, craft their texts with consideration for the works of their predecessors. A new writer is regarded as a parasite while the previous writer is regarded as the host [14]. This reinforces the belief that no text is truly original. This portion seeks to demonstrate intertextual aspects between *Mahlatse a Madimabe* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Thereafter, influential contributions of the Bible towards *Mahlatse a Madimabe* will be discussed.

4.1 Seitshwenyeng and Christian: Parallels between their challenges and successes

The spiritual journeys undertaken by the protagonists Seitshwenyeng and Christian reveal the intertextual relationship between *Mahlatse a Madimabe* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. We compare both their challenges and successes in the narratives to substantiate the claim of their sameness. [15] explains the word “compare” as a way to examine people or things to see how they are similar and different. This intertextual study will focus solely on the similarities between the two characters to understand how texts influence each other. Both Seitshwenyeng and Christian experience some similar challenges in their lives. The fact that they are spiritual characters perpetuates these challenges. Their expressions and actions, which other characters find difficult to understand, reveal their spirituality. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, it is said this about Christian:

He reveals his sorrows and anxieties to his wife and family but finds no sympathy there; and failing to obtain companionship on the heavenward road, he starts alone upon this spiritual journey (pg.1).

The expressions Christian makes to his wife and parents are hard to comprehend because they are spiritual. He tells them that he wants to take a journey to the unknown place. This startles both his wife and parents. They fail to comprehend the hardships of the spiritual journey that is said to be taken. This story is similar to that of Seitshwenyeng. He acts confusingly towards his wife and parents:

Letšatši le lengwe mong wa lapa le mosadimogolo wa gagwe ba ile ge ba tsoga, ya ba semaka go tla go hwetša morwa le mosadi wa gagwe ba dutše ka thoko ye le yela kua seferong (pg.32)

[The other day the father and his wife were surprised to find their son and his wife standing beside the gate in the morning.]

At this point, Thanthakedi was blocking Seitshwenyeng from leaving the gate. When his father Motšhelatšhego asks what is happening, the narrator explains how Seitshwenyeng responded:

Monnamogolo o ile a tširošwa ke phetolo ya mohuta woo, mofetodi a ipolela gore go na le fao a go hlologetšego, fao fela a sa go tsebego (pg.33)

[The old man was startled by the kind of response; the responder confessed that he misses some place, a place where he doesn't even know.]

When Seitshwenyeng officially tells his family that he misses the “unknown place,” they fail to understand him. The whole family grapples with this issue until they seek guidance from a traditional healer, who affirms the existence of a person who is about to set out on a journey and will return one day bearing exciting news. Seitshwenyeng went missing some time after that event.

Another characteristic that links Seitshwenyeng and Christian is their experience of dreams, also known as visions. They are the dreaming characters; they are experiencing unusual dreams. [16] reveal that imaginative narratives use dreams as a divine revelation. Christian once experienced a dream in which he embarked on a lengthy journey, traversing rivers, hills, and mountains. In his words, Christian attests:

“As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den; and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back” (pg.2)

The above extract highlights three aspects: a den, the sleeping, and a dream. The den that Christian mentions here is likened to the Thabalešoba cave, where Seitshwenyeng finds himself after disappearing. Like Christian, Seitshwenyeng also hides in this cave and spends a long sleep there. While sleeping there, he dreams about a burdened man who came to ford him. Seitshwenyeng compares this unknown man he saw in his dream to Mr. Worldly Wiseman from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Mr. Wiseman is the rescuer who walked Christian to the gate of Evangelist's house (pg.25). This church house serves as a symbol of repentance, where Christians have experienced salvation. This is likened to this evangelist house in the village of King Molobi, where Seitshwenyeng first encountered the missionaries. This is the same place where the missionaries guided Seitshwenyeng towards salvation. The conversion of the Christian upon his arrival at Evangelist House parallels that of Seitshwenyeng upon his arrival at King Molobi village, where he encountered the missionaries. Both of their dreams serve as a means to justify their conversion to Christianity [16]. Their adherence to the spiritual calling eventually leads them to their successful divine revelation. Both Seitshwenyeng and Christian become preachers who spread God's word. No wonder Seitshwenyeng is given a biblical name, “Moruti Ntateleng,” meaning follow me. For this reason, he returned to his hometown, King Sebege, with the goal of converting many people to Christianity through the spread and preaching of the word. Upon his return to his hometown, he shares his conversion with the king:

“Ka ge lehono sebatakomo o bona ka noši gore ke maamong a šele, ke tla gapeletšega go phela bophelo bjo bo šele bjoo fela e sego bjo ke bo kgethilego, eupša bjoo ke bo tswaletšwego” (pg.204)

[As my leader can notice the unusual situation I am in today, I am propelled to live the unusual life that I did not choose but which I was born to.]

The other similarity between the two texts is found in the two groups of characters: the one who resists conversion and the one who embraces it. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a character named Obstinate refuses to take a journey to the Evangelist house with Christian. The writer employs this name to signify a group of people who are aggressive, defying divine revelation. Oxford Advance Learners' Dictionary [15] explains the word obstinate as stubbornly refusing to change one's opinion. The other group of people in *Mahlatse a Madimabe* represents the actions of Obstinate. This faction defies the arrival of missionaries in their land and suggests that they should go back. They challenge the teachings of Christianity in their daily lives. Amidst these challenges, King Molobi leads a group that embraces the missionary biblical teachings. This faction is represented by a character named Pliable in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. They are flexible to conversion. A king belonging to the pliable faction proposes this:

"...fela tabakgolo ke le kgopela go amogela thuto ya baeng bakhwi yeo fela e sa rego o ile sa gore le sa gore eupša e rego tsebang le be le rapeleng Modimo yo badimo le bona ba mo tsebang ba bilego ba mo rapelago" (pg.141)

[...but I mainly plead with you to accept these visitors' education, which does not set you boundaries but which says know and pray to your God, Whom your ancestors know, and also pray to.]

The extract above clearly shows that some individuals embraced mission education with a positive attitude. Thus, the proceeding section demonstrates how the missionaries sow a Christian seed in a Black man's country.

4.2 The arrival of missionaries and their teaching of the Bible

For years, the Bible has served as the backbone for a plethora of literary texts around the globe. Sepedi writers are no exception to this phenomenon. For Matsepe to be regarded as the foremost novelist and poet in Sepedi, two influential sources, the Bible and (African) traditional religion, should never be overlooked [17]. These two sources should be equally credited towards the success of Matsepe's literary contribution. Serudu [18] supports this view when alluding to the fact that both the Christian and traditional religions existed equally in Matsepe's narratives.

In the selected novel for this chapter, *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, we read about the arrival of missionaries in a Black land. History regards Jan van Riebeeck as the first Dutch person to arrive in South Africa in 1652. In 1834, the Germans, Merensky and Grutzner, arrived in South Africa to establish missionary institutions. Among other purposes, theirs was mainly to spread the word of God through the Bible. The reading of *Mahlatse a Madimabe* recounts a similar story. On pages 99 to 100, Seitshwenyeng and King Molobi share the same dream wherein they saw two white men arriving in their land. The narrator says:

Bobedi bja bona e be e le batho ba ba šele ka mmala le meriri ka gore e be e le bathobašweu ba meriri le maledu a maditsi, mothomoso yola a bego a na le bona a bolela gore ke makgowa ao a sepetšago a bilego a ruta lentšu la Modimo (pg.102).

[The two individuals were distinctive in terms of their hair and skin colour; they were white, had rounded hair, and sported beards. The Black person who was with them at the time translated that they are Whites who are spreading and teaching the word of God.]

King Molobi and neighbouring monarchs welcomed white missionaries with open hearts. The narrators explain that the missionaries were already familiar with the local language, likely due to their travels through surrounding villages. The missionaries' first task was to introduce baptism to the Molobi people. Although there was initial resistance, many eventually accepted baptism and underwent the ritual. These missionaries emphasised forgiveness as a key principle, and their teachings soon began to influence the community.

One notable example involved a man who unearthed his sister's husband's grave, a controversial act. King Molobi granted the missionaries the authority to judge the man. They advocated for forgiveness, suggesting that he deserved a second chance. Inspired by this, the man immediately requested baptism, setting an example that many others followed.

The missionaries also introduced the concept of the Sabbath day, a practice unfamiliar to the Black community at the time. They explained that the Sabbath was a day of rest. Alongside this, they taught the Biblical laws to the Molobi people. King Molobi himself grappled with these teachings; for instance, when he considered killing Seitshwenyeng, he was restrained by the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13).

In African culture, it is customary for a patient to pay a traditional healer—whether with money, livestock, or other forms of compensation—for diagnosis and treatment. However, in *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, the missionaries challenged this tradition by healing people through prayer without demanding payment.

The missionaries also gave Biblical or Christian names to Black people upon their arrival in Africa, often to aid pronunciation or serve colonial purposes [17]. However, Matsepe flips this narrative by assigning the missionaries Pedi names instead of giving Black people English ones. One missionary is named Sokologang (Repent), derived from Matthew 3:2, while the other is called Balesetšeng (Let them come to me), inspired by Matthew 19:14. The narrator notes that the missionaries were delighted with these names because they aligned with their mission of spreading God's word.

Biblical extracts were already interwoven into the narrative even before the missionaries' arrival. Matsepe, heavily influenced by Christian teachings, frequently incorporates Biblical verses to support the themes in his literary works. For instance, when Seitshwenyeng becomes trapped in a cave, the narrator reflects on the situation through a Biblical lens:

...o ile a emišetša mahlo a gagwe thabeng ye le yela a hwetša go se fao tlhakodišo ya gagwe e ka tšwago ntshe, eupša e swanetše ebile e tlamegile go tšwa go yena ka noši (Pg.57)

[...he then lifted his eyes toward the surrounding mountains, searching for rescue. Realising no help would come, he understood that his salvation could only arise from within himself.]

The above extract is adopted from Psalm 121:1, which states that: "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; where does my help come from?" Thus, God leaves

Seitshwenyeng with no choice but to devise a plan to escape the cave on his own. When Seitshwenyeng recalls how he survived in the cave, the issue of redemption also comes into play. The narrator says, “...*mo gongwe tlhologelo yeo e ile go mo laetša tsela yeo e ka se mo išego melekong eupša e tlogo go mo phološa bobeng gona ka fale mphomeng*” (... maybe he then realised the way that did not lead him into temptation but which delivered him from that cave). This application of Matthew 6:13 highlights the redemption that God accomplished for Seitshwenyeng. The creativeness of a literary writer is portrayed and acknowledged here with Matsepe as a reference, still not neglecting the idea that ‘texts are not original’.

5. Discussion of findings

The above presentation reveals that the Bible and other Western-themed texts contributed immensely towards the planning, crafting and thematising of African written literature, with Sepedi novel as a point of reference. This intertextual analysis indicates that spiritual journeys undertaken by Seitshwenyeng in *Mahlatse a Madimabe* and Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are parallel. As discussed, this is perpetuated by the view that Matsepe read from Bunyan's spiritual text as well as from the Bible. It is also worth to mention that Bunyan also read extensively from the Bible prior writing this spiritual text. Both writers understood dreams experienced by the biblical Joseph and thematise them into their literary contributions. These dreams were analysed as the main driver towards the spiritual journey. Matsepe, as shortly presented above, employ this spiritual journey to convert his African-believed people into Christianity. While he does not undermine his African religion, repentance from his people is what he observed as a need. He cautions his people that conversion into Christianity has a potential to reunite divided nations. This opinion is captured in the analysis through the arrival of missionaries within the Black man's village to preach the word of God. Their presence and spiritual duties result in enemies coming together. Village kings reunite and live together. Thus, dreams are found to be a key driver towards human being's conversion. Dreams were the first signs of spiritual repentance within both Seitshwenyeng and Christian.

Overall, the study found that literary texts lean thematically on spiritual texts, particularly the Bible as the main source. The analysis proved that *Mahlatse a Madimabe* is intertextually influenced by both Bunyan and the Bible. Spiritual signs, such as dreams in this case, should not be taken for granted during conversion process.

6. Conclusion

For successful interpretation of texts, readers must understand how new texts relate to their predecessors [19]. This chapter has demonstrated that Matsepe's *Mahlatse a Madimabe* is “not really new” in its essence. The researcher, as a reader, recognises the intertextual connections between *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible. An intertextual framework effectively explored these relationships, revealing that literary compositions often heavily draw from existing works, including foundational texts like the Bible and cultural traditions.

The study affirmed that writers are inherently readers who transform and build upon the works of others. It showed that texts and their creators influence one another, underscoring the cyclical nature of literary production.

Future research on the Sepedi language should delve deeper into the intertextual relationships between literary works. Given the length constraints of this chapter, the analysis focused solely on a single narrative by Matsepe. Broader studies on intertextuality in African languages could highlight for aspiring writers that writing is a reflection of life experiences—an art that evolves from what one reads, observes, and encounters. Writing, as a reciprocal art, draws on human situations and historical contexts.

In *Mahlatse a Madimabe*, Matsepe contextualised the Bible to resonate with his audience during South Africa's postcolonial and apartheid eras. Similarly, contemporary writers in post-apartheid South Africa can continue this tradition, using literary art to address and reflect on current human experiences.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Writing on the Edge: Self-Elegy in S. Plath and J. L. Nancy's Notion of "Excription"

Boutheina Boughnim

Abstract

Six weeks before her self-inflicted demise, Sylvia Plath wrote a poem entitled "Edge" (1962), which was published posthumously and drew less attention than the notorious "Lady Lazarus". The poem, however, which one may read as the poetess' self-composed/dedicated elegy, is chilling. The grisly character of the scene it portrays lies beyond its macabre theme and gripping imagery. Its true mystery, which makes it irresistibly haunting for the reader, lies in its title, "Edge". Albeit fortuitous at first glance, the notion of edge, brink or threshold is, however, visceral, as we shall discover in the light of Jean Luc Nancy's thought, to broach both body and psyche's realities, which lie beyond expressible meaning, as the two-step out of meaning and remain on the threshold of existence. The present article seeks to investigate the correlation between the elegy as a poetic form and the articulation, mimetic endeavour of a death scene. Nancy's thought in this perspective could be highly edifying since he provides a ground-breaking approach to the three tenets: body, psyche and death.

Keywords: elegy form, S. Plath, body, Caravaggio, J. L. Nancy, psyche, edge

1. Introduction

Six weeks before her self-inflicted demise, Sylvia Plath wrote a poem entitled "Edge" (1962), which was published posthumously and drew less attention than the notorious "Lady Lazarus". The poem, however, which one may read as the poetess' self-composed/dedicated elegy, is chilling. The grisly character of the scene it portrays lies beyond its macabre theme and gripping imagery. Its true mystery, which makes it irresistibly haunting for the reader, lies in its title, "Edge". Albeit fortuitous at first glance, the notion of edge, brink or threshold is, however, visceral, as we shall discover in the light of Jean Luc Nancy's thought, to broach both body and psyche's realities, which lie beyond expressible meaning, as the two-step out of meaning and remain on the threshold of existence. Plath's poem marks 'the limit'. It identifies the threshold as the fitting space to approach the irreducible realities of body and psyche. The deceased protagonist wears a victorious smile on her cadaverous face, thus indicating the feat she has achieved: reaching the "edge", the outer limit of her body and psyche.

2. Elegy as a poetic form and genre

Elegy is as old as poetry itself, David Kennedy points out (2). Referring himself to both Hollander and Kay's appraisals of the elegy as a poetic form, Kennedy evokes their respective readings of elegy as an overarching a "mood" and as a "form without frontiers" (Kennedy, p. 2). Kennedy stresses the formal volatility of the elegy, which draws on the sonnet, *terza rima*, blank and free verse etc. All in all, elegy is a song, an elegiac song that is "...a song of lamentation, in particular a funeral song or lament for the dead; and, in addition, meditative or reflective verse, more properly termed elegiac poetry" (Kennedy, p. 2).

As a sub-genre of poetry, elegy originates from the Greek writing tradition, *elogos*, which "originally describes a poem written in elegiac distich, a couplet composed of a hexameter followed by a pentameter" (Kennedy, p. 3). The thematic scope of such elegiac couplet, though tinged with plaintive undertones, could draw on a miscellany of topics from politics, as exhortatory epigrams, to love, as amatory complaints, and even erotic verse, as is the case with Ovid's *Elegia* which was translated by Marlow (Kennedy, p. 3). In the case of Plath's elegy entitled "Edge", the "elegiac distich"/couplet seems to hover over the poem in question; its three-to-four beat stress-metre orchestration and stanzaic patterning are highly reminiscent of the elegiac distich tradition. Plath composed her poem into couplets, which, despite their stanzaic setting off, are tightly clipped due to the strong run-on enjambment operating throughout the poem. Curious, in relation to the poem's own theme of some fathomless limited experience, how the ending of each couplet is suspended onto the threshold of the following couplet to delineate its full meaning. Every couplet acts as a "sense nucleus" whose decisive signification borders on the consequent couplet as it pours forth.

Not only on the level of form does Plath's poem echo the Greek tradition, but thematically as well. Its subject matter is not only death and lamentation but existence itself with its attendant mysteries and contradictions. Among these contradictions, the assumption or rather the terrible, irreversible deduction that a "perfected life" can but be rounded off by the anticipated experience of death. Thus, in Plath's (self-) elegy, the dead protagonist, with the still unfaded smile on her lips, seems surreal, as if not entirely dead. She seems to be occupying a liminal space between dread and bliss. The very same space that the German poet Maria Rilke alludes to when introducing his elegies and songs dedicated to Orpheus.

Rilke identifies one of life's most enduring and fascinating mysteries as not the "mask of the dreadful", but "the dreadful itself", which constitutes the very essence of our life, underlying every aspect of our human existence. Rilke sustains, not without recalling Heideggerian thought on death as the doorway to the authenticity of life as *Dasein* [1],¹ which once we acknowledge the unfathomable prominence of life's "terrifying dreadfulness", acquiesce to its ubiquitous control over our existence, we acquire a sense of "bliss" and blessedness. In his letter to Countess Margot, 1923, Rilke evokes the inspiring mood that begot his Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, their "true significance and purpose", as follows:

¹ According to Heidegger, "The essence of *Dasein* is its existence". He suggests that *Dasein* is a form of existence which is perennially prone to a myriad of modes of materializations, which is rather unsettling. He argues that any given mode of existence is "ungrounded"; "it is the null basis of its nullity". *Dasein*'s ruse to counter its own 'ungroundedness' is the creation of societal norms and regarding them as truth. However, such ruse is only a disguise. Anxiety (incurred by the agent of Death) lies underneath and paradoxically enough it constitutes the doorway to authentic existence through self-liberation ([2], p. 88).

But as soon as we acknowledge its [life's] dreadfulness...with a confidence that this very dreadfulness may be something completely ours... as soon as we accept life's most terrifying dreadfulness, at the risk of perishing from it... then an intuition of blessedness will open up for us and, at this cost will be ours [3].²

According to Rilke, the irreducible excess, "our own Too-much", underlying the human condition inherent in the ineluctable and unfathomable terror underlying it, can only be tamed if we, in our turn, give in to its command to self-appropriate life's terror and dread, full-heartedly, leads to self-appropriation itself. Rilke warns whoever misses the correspondence between "dread" and "blessedness" because he or she shall be kept at the threshold of life. "Whoever does not... give his full consent, his full and joyous consent, to the dreadfulness of life, can never take possession of the unutterable abundance and power of our existence; can only walk on its *edge*, and one day when the judgement is given, will have been neither alive nor dead". Interesting is Rilke's use of the term "edge", which Plath uses to title her "last-word poem" [5].³ The dyad of "dreadfulness" and "bliss" is, accordingly, the edge itself that cements both step ways to human existence.

Being so deeply enmeshed into the drama endemic to human existence, the elegy transcends its status as a funeral song or "mortuary verse" [7]⁴ to be transmuted into a meta-reflective verse into which poetry as a whole is incorporated [9].⁵ In a word, Kennedy sustains that elegy is not a sub-genre of poetry but vice versa. Poetry is necessarily self-directed. He summons Coleridge's own definition of elegy as an account of "...every thing as lost and gone, or absent and future" (pp. 7–8) to claim the endemic relevance of the elegy's subject matter to our own age, which Agamben essentially identifies as "a profoundly melancholic age", marked not only by the pervasive presence of the notion of loss, but of the consecration of its experience, Kennedy sustains (Kennedy, p. 7). The thematic wingspan of the elegy tradition corresponds, thus, to the mindset, the thematic scope of a whole age that is ours. Such pervasive pertinence of the elegiac tradition resonates in Coleridge's terms, which Kennedy summons while relating elegy to contemporary poetry:

The dominance of elegiac poetry also has interesting origins within poetry itself. Large areas of contemporary poetry seem, in Coleridge's terms, to '[present] every thing as lost and gone, or absent and future' to the extent that poetry often seems like a sub-genre of elegy as opposed to the other way round. This may at some level be symptomatic of poetry's fallen cultural status, a kind of self-mourning. (pp. 7-8)

Accordingly, two literary theoretical deductions may be drawn from Kennedy's observations. First, the intrinsic presence of the themes of irrevocable loss and blurry inception in contemporary poetry makes it fall under the jurisdiction of the elegy tradition. Poetry becomes, thus, a sub-genre of the elegy genre and not the other way round. Ethical and cultural motives, apart from the overall anxiety and sense of loss which permeate the modern and postmodern ages, are behind poetry's own subordination to the elegy genre, which is, as Kennedy states above, the conjunctural "fallen

² *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* ([4], p. 133).

³ I have borrowed this term from Kennedy ([6], p. 7).

⁴ Kennedy ([8], p. 7).

⁵ *ibid.*

status” (Kennedy, p. 8) of poetry as a cultural, social and even political force. In this regard, every poem becomes a tacit self-elegy.

3. “Dying is an art...”

Sylvia Plath envisions death as a work of art, an artistic oeuvre to be accomplished properly. In “Lady Lazarus”, she already declares “Dying is an art...”, which implies the necessity of decorum and preliminary protocols which should be observed. The latter is comparable, in principle, to the protocolary practises expounded in the notorious classic and treatise on the experience of a proper death that dates back to the late Middle Ages *Ars Moriendi*. The oeuvre in question dissects, so to speak, the very last successive intervals of the agonising subject’s experience of death throes. It provides a sort of catalogue of those deeply intimate moments with the appropriate spiritual prayers and comforting exhortations to accompany the dying subject before he or she draws his or her last breath. Interesting is the parallel, common illustrative pictorial dimension through the mimetic staging, exposition of the agonising body, laid down to be witnessed via eleven drawn illustrations in *Ars Moriendi* [6]⁶ and the ghastly solemn poetic imagery of the dead woman’s body in Plath’s poem “Edge”. In both, literary productions death is on display. Broaching death as an artistic oeuvre implies the necessity of formal dexterity. In the same way, as *Ars Moriendi* offers a reference guide for a proper death, (self-)elegy stands out, in Plath’s case, as the appropriate poetic form to encapsulate, stage the protagonist’s anticipated death scene, a scene not so much sinister or grisly as disquietingly fascinating. As a matter of fact, the poem is impregnated by a sense of completion and (self)-reconciliation, which verge on some gratifying experience of self- “accomplishment” [8, 10, 11]⁷ inherent in the subject’s passage to death.

From this perspective, Diana Fuss rightly refers to Blanchot’s thoughts on the slyly ubiquitous notion of death that informs poetic composition by summoning Blanchot’s assertion: “Whoever delves into verse dies” (p. 41). Fuss evokes Plath’s poem “Stillborn”, composed in 1960, which introduces poetry’s active status as germane to some sort of a liminal space; a poem is neither fully born nor fully dead, but standing on a conterminous edge. In this light, Fuss points out how Plath’s poem “Stillborn” “... places poetry in an ambiguous space somewhere between life and death. For Plath, a poem is at once dead (stillborn) and alive (stillborn)” (p. 75). Such liminal state of vacillating between the inchoate and the deadened does not only pertain to the poem as a (self-) writing process, but to the poet herself. The following lines from Plath’s poem “Stillborn” resonate in this sense:

*But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her [2].*⁸

Plath’s lines articulate a grisly acknowledgement, that of the deadened inadequacy of the verbal poetic medium to channel its composer’s innermost state of being and subjective economy. In consequence, the poetess prefers, verging on death herself,

⁶ The English translation of *Ars Moriendi* refers, for instance, to the first drawn illustration of “... the dying man [who] is represented on his bed, [half] naked... waiting to receive death sacraments and spiritual attendance” ([5], p. 3).

⁷ “Edge” ([12], p. 45).

⁸ Plath quoted in Fuss, ([7], p. 76).

prefers the diffuse state of "distraction". Her poems, which fail short of the complexity of her emotional and existential being, lay "dead" on the sheet but still can sneak a "stare" at her but remain utterly useless as they "do no", cannot, "speak of her". Fuss pertinently comments: "Plath's poems do not speak *of* her", but they are the only things speaking *for* her. Ironically, Plath can speak in the poem only through the agency of the dead words she memorialises. Here we find the deepest and most disturbing connection between poems and corpses" (Fuss' emphasis, 76).

4. Poetic closure

Among the formal and structural criteria of a proper death poem/song is its closure. Poetic closure is a necessary protocol for a proper poetic account of a proper death. In her reference work on poetic closure, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*, Barbara Herriton associates poetic closure with musical coda, whose essential role is to round off a musical piece: "In music, the coda is a terminal section of a piece or movement, added for the specific purpose of securing closure and clearly distinguished from the preceding portion by its structure" (p. 188). In (lyrical) poetry, such final effect, or what Barbara Smith identifies in her analysis of Milton's celebrated pastoral elegy, "Lycidas", as "closural force" (188), may be achieved through the introduction of some formal and stylistic features such as, the thematic insertion of a sense of "ultimate stability", lexical "closural allusions", parallelisms and "terminal rhyming couplets" (p. 192). In elegy, one may sustain, the closural force operates in a more tricky manner since the poem already starts by termination, the ultimate ending that is death. It bathes, already, in the notion of expiration. Slight formal and thematic alterations, as Barbara Smith sustains above, may work as implicit hints and converge into heightening the poem's closure.

In Plath's self-elegy "Edge", we find echoes of most of the aforementioned closural agents by Smith. While from the outset, the speaker sets the mood and closes the loop of the poem's unfolding narrative through clear-cut, conclusive terms like "perfect" and "accomplishment". The poem starts with a sense of triumphant completion followed by instances of gripping imagery portraying the woman's dead body laying with the corpses of her two children vaulted upon her bosom, then, ends on a serene note, that of nocturnal quietude. The first overt closural indication in Plath's poem occurs in the sixth line in which the dead woman's feet declare: "We have come so far, it is over" [4].⁹ The statement in question announces both realisation and acknowledgement of the dead body's feet's having reached the terminus station of their allotted journey. Follows a multitude of closural terms and phrases like "now empty", "rose close" and "night". We note as well three lines before the poem's ending the evocation of the moon's impassive mutism before the sinister sight of the dead woman's body with both her children coiled back onto her breast: "The moon has nothing to be said about" [13].¹⁰ The last three lines are striking by their rhythmic and metrical parallelism. Whereas the poem's previous lines, written in stress metre, oscillate between two and three and even four stress-lines, the last three lines stand out as increasingly regular, which heightens and perfects the poem's final sense of closure [12]:¹¹

⁹ "Edge" ([12], p. 45).

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Rhythm markers: x, unstressed syllable or offbeat; ·, promoted unstressed syllable; /, stressed syllable or beat; \, demoted stress.

x / x / \ x x / x /
 The moon has nothing to be sad about,
 / x x x / x /
 Staring from her hood of bone.
 x x / x x \ x /
 She is used to this sort of thing.
 x / \ x /
 Her blacks crackle and drag.

While the poem's whole previous lines vary in terms of syllabic counting and stress number, the last stands out as nearly regular and metrically parallel with three stresses in each line. They may be thought to operate as a "poetic coda" [14],¹² a sort of musical "envoy"¹³ which is meant to round off the poem unfolding ideas and images. The poem's sense of closure is not only perceived formally, through the regularity and terminal poise of the last lines' metrical and rhythmic patterning but thematically as well. The sinister, chilling portrayal of the moon peeking "...from her hood of bone" imparts an intrinsic deadly nature to the moon's cadaverous pallor, which perfectly matches the displayed scene. The last line portrays nightfall as the moon's unfurling black, folded robe whose swishing and flouncing is overheard in the near alliteration of the slacken voiced fricative/r/in "crackle" and "drag".

5. Plath's poem "edge" and Nancy's notion of "psyche"

In Plath's poem "Edge", death is assimilated with a state of "perfectedness"¹⁴: the body which lies exposed, relegated to staging, displays itself for the first time in tandem with its sick, devastated psyche. The latter can at last manifest itself through its true "extended" nature. The term "extended" is taken from one of Freud's posthumous notes. The note in question, which the French philosopher Nancy qualifies as "Freud's most fascinating and perhaps...most decisive statement", goes as follows: "The psyche's extended: knows nothing about it" (*Corpus*, p. 21). Consequently, Psyche is in a state of both exposition and constant denial: its exposure lies in its very fleetingness. In this sense, Nancy points out: "... in other words, [psyche] is body, and this is precisely what escapes it, and Its escape (we may suppose), or its process of escape, constitutes it as "psyche", in a dimension of not (being able/wanting)-to-know-itself" (*Corpus*, p. 122). Like the concept of the body, which Nancy dissects in a fascinating way in his book *Corpus* through an investigational philosophical journey whose point of departure is Christ's consecrated statement "*hoc est enim corpus meum*",¹⁵ Psyche abhors and flees meaningful reduction. It may be read, in the manner Nancy reads the body through Christ's allegorical assimilation/projection of his blood-and-flesh with

¹² A term borrowed from Barbara Smith ([13], p. 186).

¹³ Barbara Smith defines the "envoy" in poetic composition as "the terminal modification of formal principles [which] arrests the reader's expectations of further development and thus prepares him for cessation" p. 192.

¹⁴ Barbara Smith defines the "envoy" in poetic composition as "the terminal modification of formal principles [which] arrests the reader's expectations of further development and thus prepares him for cessation" p. 192.

¹⁵ *Corpus*, p. 11.

respectively wine and bread, as an "ectopia".¹⁶ In this regard, Psyche is to be envisioned as a projection or displacement of meaning.

To join Psyche in its projection/its being "extended", the body, ideally, needs to step out of itself, and this would be the great "accomplishment" (Plath, "Edge", p. 224). Both body and (its) Psyche would be the sites of "expropriation"¹⁷ or "exscription"¹⁸ (explain it either here or in a footnote) of meaning, of life with its attendant constructs. Both would be "ectopias".¹⁹ Nancy draws upon the woman's breast paradigm to epitomise both body and psyche's fundamental outwardly-projected, ramifying nature. In *Corpus*, Nancy expands upon his allegory of the breast as follows: "[the] paradigm is probably the woman's breast, a mass that localises many an ectopia. Nourishment, separate object, ... the bearing of a curve, bearing fruit: the *b(e)aring of breasts* exemplifies every birth as an essential modalising of areality... This privilege of dense and zoned areality is named, and spaced, as *areola*".²⁰ According to Nancy, thus, the breast, the fleshy protuberance upon the woman's torso with a central nipple point from which diverge a multitude of veins, help materialise a condensation of an irreducible reality, or "a-reality", that of the body and psyche as a zoned maternal "areola". Nancy's "breast paradigm" deeply resonates with the breast imagery in Plath's poem "Edge" in which the physical protuberance of the breast is reinforced by the clinging two dead children, coiled, clutching, each, onto one breast of the dead mother:

*Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little
Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded
Them back into her body as petals*²¹

The macabre and gripping imagery in Plath's lines of the dead children coiled in a serpent-like manner around the breast of their mother. The latter, folding them back to her dry bosom as petals, may be read as an allegory of both the body and psyche's irreducible reality or what Nancy identifies above as "areality". The two children become "rhizomes" of both the psyche's extension, almost parasitical, hanging upon the body.

To join psyche in its extension/projection, the body needs to step out of itself as traditionally and erroneously associated with a repository of meaning(s). It needs to expropriate itself, to relegate itself to nothing(ness), to become an "untouchable",²² ungraspable, though visible, entity. In a word, to accede psyche, the subject needs to engage with his/her own mourning. Such (self-)mourning is not necessarily tragic or grim, nor is its poetic representation/inscription. It is prompted by the desire for death, the "accomplishment"²³ of which takes poetry beyond the poetic, to enact its own "désœuvrement",²⁴ dissolving.

¹⁶ *Corpus*, p. 23.

¹⁷ *The Birth to Presence*, p. 396.

¹⁸ *The Birth to Presence*, p. 359.

¹⁹ *Corpus*, p. 23.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Plath, p. 224.

²² Derrida, p. 268.

²³ Plath, p. 45.

²⁴ I have borrowed this term used by J. L. Nancy in his book *The Birth to Presence*, p. 155.

In his commentary on Baudelaire's poem "Le Désir de Peindre", in which the speaker evokes being torn by both the desire "to paint" his deceased beloved and the desire for death, Nancy refers to Baudelaire's juxtaposition of death with the dead beloved's beaming laughter. Such juxtaposition does not stem, according to Nancy, from some macabre poetic gusto, but rather epitomises the Subject's, poetry's own self-surpassing: "...[P]oetry is inspired to renounce "pleasure", to take pleasure beyond pleasure, in the act of dying exposed to laughter, poetry beyond the poetic, poetry that paints its own surpassing—art itself..."²⁵ Far from being repulsive or gruesome, the poetic painting of the dead person hinges on perfection, desistance from pleasure and emancipates both the protagonist and the poetry itself. Both transcend their respective existential and aesthetic limits. In Plath's poem, the opening lines portray a dead woman figure in a "perfected" posture, lying down, triumphantly smiling:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

*Body wears the smile of accomplishment,*²⁶

The intrinsic state of the psyche "being extended" is equally accompanied by a "folding" or shrinking movement heralding an imminent "implosion"²⁷ due to a "saturation" of sense besieging the body. In this sense, Nancy laments the saturation of meaning inflicted upon the body by the forefathers of psychoanalysis. He credits Freud for foregrounding the subconscious in his treatment of the subject. According to Nancy, the "saturation" of meaning is necessarily counterpointed by a pathological sense of excess, or what he identifies as "hysteria". He sustains: "hysteria is instituted as exemplary: a body saturated with signification. And hence no more body ... I would prefer to take hysteria as the body's becoming totally parasitical upon the incorporeality of sense... thereby showing, in its stead, a piece, a zone, of a-significance".²⁸ Thus, "incorporeality of sense" implies a state, or "spacing",²⁹ of non-meaning or rather outside meaning: death of meaning is the meaning of death that is manifested through "excess", a concentration turned upon itself at the moment of "areality". In this sense, Nancy affirms:

*The hysterical body is exemplary in its affirmation-at an unattainable limit-of a pure concentration in itself, the pure being-in-itself of its extension, which in turn denies and renders catatonic its extendedness and its spacing. A body that cannot be unfolded or opened up. A subject, an absolute substance, absolutely a-signifying. This limit manifests the truth of the body, in the form of its implosion.*³⁰

Plath's petal imagery of a rose closing upon herself, calling her "petals" back into her bud deeply resonates with Nancy's notion of "catatonic extendedness and concentration" evoked above. A notion that operates through a double bind constraint via which an emotion is given free vent, or in Nancy's terms: "something that opens up in pain or pleasure, and does not withdraw, something that *makes room* for a passage through the limit, rather than hardening it-is this not, perhaps, a kind

²⁵ *The Birth to Presence*, p. 396.

²⁶ Plath, p. 45.

²⁷ *Corpus*, p. 24.

²⁸ *Corpus*, p. 24.

²⁹ *Corpus*, p. 25.

³⁰ *ibid.*

of joyful hysteria..."³¹ As a matter of fact, this very "something", which is unleashed in "pleasure" or "pain", endures and becomes a gateway for some "joyful hysteria", in the manner of Nietzsche's "gay knowledge"—which is, for Nancy, "the edge of knowledge"—that breaks through the "limit" of meaning-loaded existence. A joyful hysteria enacted through the suicidal act. In this sense, the laying body in Plath's poem displays a vanquisher smile: Her dead/Body wears "the smile of accomplishment[.]" Ideally, the body, in its extension, at the image of the Psyche, should display the shifting, leaking limit(s) which underly its reality, "an extension of the breakthrough that existence is", Nancy highlights.³² Such space of both the Psyche's and body's "a-reality" floats over "...immemorial tectonic plates shifting under our feet, under our History"³³ In the case of Plath's poem "Edge", A plethora of psychic, poetic and mythological tectonic plates are brewing under the inert "feet" of Plath's dead protagonist draped in a Greek goddess-like robe showing her feet:

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

*We have come so far, it is over.*³⁴

The dead body become the site of "immemorial tectonic ("archi-meaning)" plates and under her feet lies the threshold of both body's and Psyche's, otherwise, unattainable/irreducible reality.

6. Plath's poem "edge" and Nancy's commentary on Caravaggio's painting

At this point, it would be highly interesting to refer to a famous and controversial painting of the scene portraying Mary's dead body known under the name of "Caravaggio: Death of the Virgin" exhibited at the Louvre Museum. The painting in question deeply resonates with Plath's portrayal of the woman's dead body. Nancy delivers a fascinating analysis of the painting in the Louvres Museum in 1962, which he publishes as an article entitled "Sur le Seuil", which we may translate as "On the Edge" or "On the Threshold", strangely coinciding with Plath's own poem "Edge". The commentary goes as follows:

We are struck, here, driven with the lifting up or the violent removing of a drapery, propelled into an oblique gush of light which tilts the skulls over the face of the laying woman, before pouring forth towards us, through the glow of a complying neck before finally sinking down into a copper basin. At this point, underneath our feet, the orange colour of the basin together with the dress which thickens it, overbrims the

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *Corpus*, p. 24.

³³ *Corpus*, p. 26.

³⁴ Plath's poem "Edge", p. 45.

*frame and marks our place on the threshold: We come full circle or rather the oval made up of the attendings flocking around the one who is laying down, moaning. We appear with those beings. (My translation)*³⁵

The scene of the Virgin Mary's displayed cadaver is both queer and uncanny. It curiously coincides, in many respects, with the staged scene of the woman's "exposed"³⁶ dead body in Plath's poem. The similitude between the two scenes seems incontestable. The highly religious character of the scene extends to further aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions. We are attending a scene of death, indiscreetly casting our scrutinising gaze down onto a (Saint) woman's dead body, not any woman's, Mary's. In Plath's poem, the dead woman lying inert is draped in a Greek goddess-like royal dress. Furthermore, both bodies present some form of protuberance or projection. In the case of Plath's protagonist, such "projection", which Nancy assimilates above as a manifestation of "ectopia", takes the form of the (parasitical) coiled children around the woman's breast. As to the Caravaggio painting, it is revealed through the corpse's macabrely swollen state.³⁷ Both the coiled dead children and the swollen flesh may be thought to allegorise the intrinsically extended/projected reality of both body and Psyche, a reality which seems to manifest itself ideally at the "edge" of death. Finally, both the Saint and the Greek goddess seem to epitomise best the corpse of a dead woman, assimilating it with some sort of sanctity or nobility. Reaching this state is an "accomplishment".³⁸ Both women wear a faint but perceptible smile, reminiscent of Nancy's aforementioned "joyful hysteria".

Commenting upon the dead figure of Saint Mary in "The Caravaggio", Nancy sustains that the laying woman seems "not to be completely dead".³⁹ The same claim would be relevant to Plath's dead woman, lying with a "smile of accomplishment" on her face. Nancy adds, "one would think she [Mary] is resting, as if she were within the threshold of death, or, perhaps, already beyond herself" (my translation, 110).⁴⁰ Nancy claims, referring to "The Caravaggio" oeuvre, that "this painting paints the threshold of existence" (my translation, p. 111).⁴¹

The notion of threshold/edge is visceral to both death scenes, whether Plath's poem "Edge", or "The Caravaggio" painting. Both respectively draw the reader and contemplator to the outer limit of existence and art, poetic or visual, a limit which manyfold,

³⁵ "Nous sommes saisis là, enlevés dans la levée ou dans l'emportement violent d'une draperie, projetés dans un jet oblique de lumière qui incline les crânes jusqu'au visage de la femme étendue, avant de rejaillir vers nous, par l'éclat d'une nuque offerte, pour finir dans le reflet d'un bassin de cuivre. Ici, à nos pieds, déjà débordant du cadre, l'ovale orangé du bassin, avec celui de la robe qui le redouble, nous donne notre place sur le seuil: nous achevons le cercle, ou bien l'ellipse, des présences. Rassemblées autour de celle qui repose et de celle qui s'afflige. Nous comparaissons avec ces présences" (*La Revue Poésie*, N: 64. "Sur le Seuil", 109–116; p. 1993).

³⁶ Plath's poem "Edge", p. 224.

³⁷ Nancy reveals in his analysis of the painting "The Caravaggio", how the painter took as a model a drowned woman's swollen cadaver (*La Revue Poésie*, p. 112).

³⁸ Plath's poem, "Edge", p. 224.

³⁹ "...elle n'est pas exactement morte"/ "...she is not completely dead" (my translation) (Nancy, "Sur le Seuil", p. 110).

⁴⁰ "On dirait aussi bien qu'elle se repose, comme si elle était encore en-deça de la mort, ou bien déjà au-delà d'elle" ("Sur le Seuil", p. 111).

⁴¹ "Cette peinture peint le seuil de l'existence..." ("Sur le Seuil", p. 111).

extended, projected, at the image of the folded fabric of the dead woman's Greek-like, long robe or Mary's dress whose frame brims, respectively, over the poem's and painting's frame to pull us into an uncanny scene, perceivable only on the threshold. Both poem and painting allow us, through the exposition of Greek goddess-like or Saintly dead women's bodies expose, or to use Nancy's term, "excribe" the irreducible reality of body, Psyche and death, with the latter underlying and transpiercing every aspect of the former. Death, as Nancy highlights in his commentary on "The Caravaggio", is the space which "... we never accede to, we always remain in. Outside and inside, without connecting, without mediation, nor passage" (my translation).⁴² Similarly, both body and Psyche are equally ungraspable, unapproachable only on the threshold: "At the outset, there is no signification, translation, or interpretation: there is this *limit*, this edge, this contour..."⁴³ The "limit" or "the edge" mark the ending of meaning, its suspension, its shattering into "ectopias", its "excription". The exposed body, Nancy confirms, "no longer returns to itself or refers to itself (to an ideality making "sense" of it)"-suspending itself *at a limit that makes its own most proper "sense"* and exposes it as such. The body of sense *exposes* this "fundamental" suspension of sense "(exposes *existence*)" (24, emphasis in the text).⁴⁴ As to Psyche, being fundamentally extended, it willingly joins the (dead) body, once the latter reaches the "edge", and victoriously draws a "smile of accomplishment"⁴⁵ on its visage. In *The Presence to Birth*, Nancy grippingly describes the scene: "Psyche is outstretched in her coffin. Soon it will be closed. Among those present, some hide their faces, others keep their eyes desperately fixed on Psyche's body" (p. 393).

7. Conclusion

What transpires from Plath's unnervingly compelling self-elegy, entitled "Edge", is not a merely moving articulation of the protagonist's acknowledged reaching of the ultimate frontier of her existence, the verge of death's abyss and imminent, ever incipient, descent, but also the disclosure of the matrix underlying poetic composition itself. Such matrix seems to draw upon the actual or subliminal experience of death. Blanchot's thoughts, expounded in his work *The Space of Literature* and which Kennedy summons above, are deeply pertinent in this regard. In his introduction to Blanchot's translated oeuvre, Ann Smock evokes Blanchot's notion of a condition which the work of art, verbal, sculptural or other, pressingly necessitates, that of death: "This demand is the one Blanchot associates with the work of art. The work requires death, the source, to be in the work; it demands that in it the ending, which initiates all beginnings, swell up as the essence of all swelling, all unfurling and flowering" (p. 15). All of the "swelling", "unfurling" and "flowering" hover over Plath's poem, echoed respectively in the woman's protuberant bosom with the coiled dead child on each side, the unfurling of the folded Greek "toga" and night's trailing "blacks" and the sinister smell exuding, "bleeding" from the flower's "deep throats of the night flower". As a matter of fact, from such "deep throats" some unspeakable truth struggles to be uttered, a truth whose articulation is nonverbal, unspeakable,

⁴² "La mort, nous y sommes jamais, nous y sommes toujours. Dehors et dedans, à la fois... sans mélange, sans médiation et sans traversée" ("Sur le Seuil", p. 111).

⁴³ *Corpus*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Corpus*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Plath's poem, "Edge", 224.

irreducible. A truth which is to be spoken as deadly silence, or simply as death. As Ann Smock reminds Blanchot's perspective above, "The work requires death". In a Heideggerian vein reminiscent of his notion of *Aletheia*, she expands on Blanchot's vision as follows: "It wants disappearance to come forth. It asks, in other words, that Being, which by receding opens the space in which beings appear, come into this clearing. The work asks that a retreat, an obscuring or effacement, show, or that the forgetfulness which inaugurates thought to return to it" (emphasis added, 15). Accordingly, the ultimate truth that the work/poem seeks to communicate is intrinsic to death in that it can only reveal itself as oblivion, retreat or disappearance. Curiously enough, all three concepts constitute the three tenets of the elegy tradition, as identified by Diana Fuss above. In this sense, she regards poetry as partaking of the elegy tradition and not vice versa, as has been previously suggested.

Therefore, death seems to be the condition of possibility of artistic creation, notably poetic composition. Such is the ultimate truth Sylvia Plath has reached the closure of both her existence and poetic career. The inseverable bond between artistic creation and the subject's/artist's own being, which is reminiscent of Heidegger's presencing⁴⁶ dimension of poetic language, is echoed in Mallarmé's own intimation of artistic creation, which Blanchot refers to as follows: "The work of art reduces itself to being. That is its task: to be, to make present" (p. 49). However, the presencing dimension of poetic language reveals nothing, or as Blanchot puts it "nothing operates in words" (p. 49). Endemically inadequate and stultified by utility, or in Blanchot's terms, "usefulness" (51), words only bring into play elusiveness and eclipsing. Blanchot sustains, in this regard, "words have the power to make things disappear...The appearance is only that of disappearance; this presence too turns to absence through the movement of wear and erosion which is the soul and life of words..." (emphasis added, 51). Interesting is Blanchot's metaphoric evocation of the status of language, as worn out and eroded, which perfectly merges with the poet's own distraught, suicidal psyche. Artistic creation becomes, thus, a relentless act of self-absencing or self-destruction. The poem's highly stylised and formally and rhythmically patterned words fall short of the totality of the subject's reality. They stand suspended on the brink of signification and silence, revelation and concealment, life and death, bound to a threshold that is prone to merge such demarcations leading them (words), as Blanchot points out, to be "always on the verge of passing from all to nothing" (p. 51). Such is the ultimate, disquieting inference Mallarmé's fictive, model poet *Igitur* comes to at the end of his poetic journey before committing suicide. Blanchot evokes the "Igitur Experience" in his book *The Space of Literature* as a corroborating illustration of his envisionment of the irrevocable experience of death by the artist/poet. He refers to Georges Ploulet's commentary on the case of

⁴⁶ I use, here, the term "presencing" from Heidegger's terminology in relation to poetic language and its power to bind us to our Being. In this sense, Heidegger sustains that poetry, due to its heightened formal, structural and rhythmic orchestration, grounds us in our being since for the first time "[w]e listen to what is spoken" (p. 192). Heidegger declares "[w]hat is spoken purely is the poem" (p. 192). Formal and sound patterning intrinsic to poetry as a verbal art is not a mere "measure-taking", according to Heidegger, but an "authentic" gauging which brings into play Being itself. Poetry presences in that it "brings forth", enacts *poiesis* as primal unfolding or disclosure: "In what is spoken, speaking gathers the ways in which it persists as well as that which persists by it—its persistence, its presencing. But most often, and too often, we encounter what is spoken only as the residue of a speaking long past... What is spoken purely is that in which the completion of the speaking that is proper to what is spoken is, in its turn, an original. What is spoken purely is the poem" (p. 192).

Mallarmé's *Igitur* as "a perfect example of philosophical suicide" (p. 52). For Blanchot, this entails, in Mallarméan thought, which he himself endorses, the intrinsic bond between poetry and death: "... the poem depends upon a profound relation to death, and is possible only if death is possible, only through the sacrifice and strain to which the poet exposes himself, death becomes power and possibility for him, only if it is an act par excellence" (Blanchot's emphasis, p. 51). Like *Igitur*, Sylvia Plath subjected herself to the workings of existential "strain" and creational "sacrifice". Like *Igitur*, Plath answered the call of death, which only an artist or a poet can overhear when fully engaging with or committed to the process of artistic creation or poetic composition.

To conclude, I would like to refer to a quote by Nancy in the last chapter of his book *The Presence to Birth*: "Psyche is outstretched in her coffin. Soon it will be closed. Among those present, some hide their faces, others keep their eyes desperately fixed on Psyche's body" (393). Similarly in Plath's poem, written 6 weeks before her committing suicide, the "boned", dead woman lying in moonlight, seems perhaps, for the first time, to be at peace with her past "blacks", the depressive periods and traumatic electroconvulsive therapy sessions. She victoriously smiles as she has reached the "edge" of her own Psyche. An "edge" is not a clear-cut limit but a dissemination of sense like the dissemination of the poem's moonlight. In the manner of Christ's "Partes extra partes," Psyche, unaware, exposes itself in Plath's poem. The dead female protagonist, however, marks with a "smile" such an accomplishment that seems to be realisable only posthumously.

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Against the Principle of Oppression: Literature and Resistance in the Prose of Graciliano Ramos

Paulo Roberto Ramos

Abstract

Barren Lives and São Bernardo, novels by Brazilian writer Graciliano Ramos, critically examine the violent structures of oppression embedded in Brazilian society. Through his incisive realism, Graciliano exemplifies a literary response that aligns with Walter Benjamin's challenge to interpret history against the grain. In both works, the characters struggle against the harshness of nature and the oppressive social forces that define their existence. Barren Lives traces the plight of a displaced family enduring their "via crucis" across the drought-stricken landscapes of Brazil's Northeast. In São Bernardo, the narrative revolves around Paulo Honório, an authoritarian figure who objectifies those around him, reducing them to mere instruments of profit, thus denying their intrinsic humanity.

Keywords: Brazilian literature, attention, ethics of care, resistance, violence against woman, famine, reification

1. Introduction

The word "read" derives from the German verb *rēdan*. In Old High German, this term was used to express a meaning beyond the mere interpretation of written texts, as it was in archaic English. It was also used in the sense of giving or taking counsel. The term "counsel," on the other hand, originates from the Latin expression *cōsulō*, which was used by authors such as Tacitus in the *Annals* [1], Propertius in his *Elegies* [2], and Cicero in *On Invention* [3], meaning to attend to, or care for. Based on these definitions, how can we consider the act of reading when I use it to interpret other human beings?

The Other, as Emmanuel Lévinas taught us, presents itself to me as an unavoidable entity, primarily through its face [4]. This radical alterity, embodied in the face, is the very element that compels me to transcend the indifference often residing within the precarious and confined boundaries of the Self. Only by discerning the profound

significance of what the face embodies—more precisely, through the exhaustive interpretation of the Other in their authentic being, grounded in the concreteness of experience within the world—can I evade all forms of prejudice toward this Other. It is only through such comportment that the eye can undertake the crossing that guides it toward the realm of the spirit [5].

Justice. To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him.

Every being cries out silently to be read differently.

To read another person is to position oneself before the presence of the Other, seeking that which, through the interpretive process inherent in the act of reading, allows transcendence beyond the confines of my self-concept. Reading is the act that unveils the hidden meanings residing within other beings, things, and places. In this sense, reading the Other becomes a process through which I reaffirm my active engagement in the world, a process that compels me to relinquish the narrow domain of the Self and embrace the full breadth of absolute alterity that the Other represents.

Graciliano Ramos's literature is distinguished by its profound commitment to reading the Other, seeking to comprehend this Other in all its complexity, with its certainties and doubts, triumphs and failures, grandeur and decline. Through his incisive and penetrating artistry, Ramos dissects the mechanisms of oppression that define Brazilian society. From the mundane lives of characters in a small provincial town, to his critique of the violent methods employed by the ruling classes and the resistance of the oppressed, to his autobiographical reflections and harrowing imprisonment in 1936 on the cusp of Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo dictatorship (1937–1945), his work resonates with unflinching clarity and depth.

Graciliano aligns himself with Brazil's subaltern groups elevating their voices to the center of the national debate. He achieves this through a language free of prejudice or stereotypes, charting a path starkly opposed to that traditionally taken by the country's elite. For Georges Bataille, one of the fundamental motivations for writing is the desire to transform the relationships between human beings, relationships he deems intolerable and identifies as a form of profound misery. This very desire serves as the driving force behind Ramos's prose.

Before delving into an analysis of São Bernardo and Barren Lives, it is essential to first consider the context of Brazilian literature in the 1930s, alongside an examination of key elements of Ramos's biography and major works.

2. The state of Brazilian literature in the 1930s

Modern Brazilian literature from the mid-nineteenth century finds a country where slavery still exists. While drawing upon European literary movements such as naturalism, symbolism, and realism, Brazilian writers began to confront the country's stark social inequalities and profound contradictions with increasing depth. This critical engagement is demonstrated in the works of authors such as Aluísio de Azevedo, Castro Alves, Cruz e Sousa, Gonçalves Dias, Joaquim de Sousaêdrade, Júlia

Lopes de Almeida, Lima Barreto, Machado de Assis, Maria Firmina dos Reis, Pedro Kilkerry, Qorpo Santo, and others.

By the early twentieth century, Lima Barreto's incisive prose provided a sharp critique of the enduring legacies of slavery and its pervasive impact on Brazilian society. Simultaneously, João do Rio's chronicles vividly captured the profound transformations brought about by Rio de Janeiro's modernization under the leadership of Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos (1902–1906). Initiated in 1903 and inspired by Baron Haussmann's nineteenth-century modernization of Paris, this ambitious urban reform radically reshaped the nation's capital.

This process of reconstruction arguably constitutes one of the most violent episodes of gentrification in Brazilian urban history. The city's impoverished population, predominantly formed of recently emancipated Black people, following the abolition of slavery in 1888, were forcibly displaced as their homes were demolished to make way for the city's new urban design. Deprived of compensation or support from public authorities, these communities were relegated to the urban peripheries, further entrenching systemic inequality and social marginalization [6].

In the 1920s, echoing the avant-garde movements in Europe and the United States, Brazilian literature entered its modernist era, where the formal revolutions proposed by Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism reached the country, filtered through the talents of authors such as Agrippino Grieco, Ascenso Ferreira, Augusto Meyer, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Crystanthème, Graça Aranha, Gilka Machado, Guilherme de Almeida, Joaquim Cardozo, Jorge de Lima, Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira, Oswald de Andrade, Raul Bopp, Ribeiro Couto, and Ronald de Carvalho.

During the 1930s, Brazil experienced a profound transformation, transitioning from an economy predominantly reliant on agriculture and oriented toward the external market to one increasingly characterized by urbanization and industrialization. Although the industrial sector did not surpass agriculture in terms of economic output until the second half of the 1950s, this shift nonetheless engendered significant social changes, as observed by Francisco de Oliveira [7]:

The new correlation of social forces, the formulation of the apparatus and state action, the regulation of the factors by which labor or the price of labor hold significance, entails both the destruction of the rules of the game according to which the economy tends towards agrarian-export activities, and, on the other hand, the creation of institutional conditions for the expansion of activities linked to the internal market.

These changes are reflected in the works of writers who depicted not only the economic and social dimensions but also the psychological effects on the lives of petite bourgeois characters, grappling with everyday urban struggles. This is evident in Dyonélio Machado's *Os Ratos* (1935), Cyro dos Anjos's *Amanuense Belmiro* and *Clarissa* (1933), written by Érico Veríssimo.

Another significant trend of the period was the emergence of a literature critically engaged in unveiling and denouncing the pervasive social inequalities in Brazil, which sought to expose the unjust conditions endured by much of the nation's population. In this regard, Jorge Amado explored such inequalities in works like *Suor* (1934), *Jubiabá* (1935), *Mar Morto* (1936), and *Captains of the Sands* (1937). The first fictional work to portray the conditions of the nascent industrial working class in Brazil was Patrícia Galvão's *Parque Industrial* (1933) and in Armando Fontes's *Os Corumbás*, also published in 1933.

A remarkable group of Northeastern writers emerged, bringing to the forefront a reality previously unknown to many readers in the South and Southeast: the violence of landowners, the *cangaço*, and the devastation of drought. While these themes had been addressed in earlier works by authors such as Tomás Pompeu (1852–1929), Idelfonso Albano (1885–1957), and Euclides da Cunha in *The Backlands* (1902), it was José Américo de Almeida's *A Bagaceira* (1929) that first brought national attention to these pressing issues.

3. Some notes on Graciliano Ramos and his work

Graciliano Ramos was born in 1892 in the small rural town of Quebrangulo, in the state of Alagoas. In 1905, his father, Sebastião Ramos, acquired a farm in Buíque, a town situated in the arid hinterlands of Pernambuco, prompting the family's relocation. A few years later, they moved again, this time to Viçosa, Alagoas, where Ramos began his formal education at a local boarding school. It was in the school newspaper that, at just twelve years old, he published his first literary work, the short story *O pequeno pedinte* ("The Little Beggar").

In 1905, the family settled in Maceió, the capital of Alagoas, where Ramos enrolled at the 15 de Março School. A year later, he published several poems in *O Malho*, a prominent magazine based in Rio de Janeiro, which was then the capital of Brazil. The experiences Ramos accumulated during his formative years in Buíque and Viçosa would later serve as the foundation for his autobiographical work *Infância* (Childhood), which reflects on his early life with poignant detail.

In 1925, Ramos was elected mayor of Palmeira dos Índios, where he had been living since 1910. During his tenure, he submitted a detailed administrative report in 1929 to the governor of Alagoas. The literary sophistication of the report captured the governor's attention, leading him to forward it to the writer and editor Augusto Frederico Schmidt. Impressed by Ramos's writing style, Schmidt reached out to inquire if he had additional works prepared for publication. This exchange culminated in the submission of the manuscript for *Caetés*, Ramos's debut novel, published in 1933.

Ramos's literary oeuvre is distinguished by its critical realism, a narrative approach that seeks to unveil and critique the various forms of oppression entrenched in Brazilian society. As Alfredo Bosi observes, Ramos's realism offers a discerning and incisive examination of the social structures of his era, marking his work as both profound and enduring [8]:

Graciliano's realism is neither organic nor spontaneous. It is critical. The "hero" is always a problem: he rejects the world, others, and himself. Suffering for what separates him from the familial or group "womb," he internalizes the conflict in a conduct of extreme harshness, which becomes his only possible mask. The novelist finds in the analytical treatment of this mask the best formula for fixing social tensions as the prime engine of all behaviors.

Graciliano Ramos's body of work can be broadly divided into two principal categories: fiction and autobiography. His fictional oeuvre includes the novels *Caetés* (1933), *São Bernardo* (1934), *Angústia* (1936), and *Vidas secas*—Barren lives (1938), alongside short stories collected in *Insônia* (1947) and *Histórias de Alexandre* (1944), the latter representing his foray into children's literature. His autobiographical works include

Infância (1943), a vivid recollection of his formative years, and *Memórias do Cárcere*, an unfinished work published posthumously in 1953, which recounts his incarceration during the repressive regime of Getúlio Vargas.

São Bernardo is a first-person narrative, told retrospectively, centering on the life of Paulo Honório, a character whose relentless and unscrupulous pursuit of wealth serves as a stark representation of a patriarchal society fixated on profit and the commodification of human lives. This novel is analyzed here through the framework of ethics of care formulated by Nell Noddings, highlighting the profound absence of relational and ethical dimensions in Honório's approach to life.

Barren Lives depicts the harrowing odyssey of a displaced family in Brazil's arid Northeast as they navigate the intersecting oppressions of drought and systemic inequalities present in Brazilian society. The novel's deeply humanistic perspective foregrounds the resilience and inherent dignity of its marginalized protagonists, aligning with Simone Weil's philosophical concept of "attention" particularly her emphasis on recognizing and affirming the humanity of those who endure suffering. Together, these works exemplify Ramos's dual commitment to incisive social critique and profound ethical engagement, hallmarks of his enduring literary legacy.

4. *São Bernardo* and the world of men

That are the tales the women tell, in the private tongue men-children are never taught and older men are too wise to learn, and these tales are not told to men. Neil Gaiman – Sandman

The trajectory of Paulo Honório, the central figure in Graciliano Ramos' novel *São Bernardo*, is defined by an obsessive pursuit of profit. This behavior manifests not only in relationships within the realm of financial transactions but also in his interactions with the people around him and the environment he inhabits. An individual who behaves this way tends to objectify everything in his surroundings—friends, lovers, and all that nature produces. This obsession with wealth reaches its fullest expression in the farm that lends its name to the book's title, as evidenced by Honório's own words [9]:

My goal in life was to take possession of the lands of São Bernardo, to build this house, to plant cotton and castor beans, to put up the lumber mill and the cotton gin, to organize these tangled woods into orchards and chicken runs, to put together a proper herd of cattle

Surpassing both significant and trivial obstacles and negotiating sacred and profane objects, Honório will employ every available means, whether legal or illicit, to accumulate wealth [10].

At first, capital kept giving me the slip though I chased it nonstop, traveling the backlands, trading in hammocks, livestock, pictures, rosaries, knickknacks, winning some here, losing out there, working on credit, signing notes, carrying out extremely complicated operations. I went hungry and thirsty, slept in the dry sand of riverbeds, fought people who only spoke in shouts, and sealed commercial transactions with loaded guns.

Antônio Cândido remarked that the sense of possession that defines Paulo Honório transcends the basic instinct of ownership, a tendency inherent to much of humanity. For the character, this behavior embodies a “*total disposition of the spirit, a general attitude toward things*.” As Cândido further argues, this feeling permeates “*his entire way of being, coloring even his emotional relationships*” [11]. In the following analysis, I will explore how this disposition is manifested in the novel through three key elements: Honório’s perception of the act of literary creation, as narrated by him; his detachment from emotional ties to his home; and his view of marriage as a mere commercial transaction.

4.1 Literature on the assembly line

Much like a Taylorist production line, the author meticulously assigned specific tasks to each individual involved in the creation of the literary work: Father Silvestre was designated to address the moral dimensions and provide Latin quotations, João Nogueira was responsible for the grammar, the journalist Lúcio Gomes de Azevedo Gondim took charge of the esthetic concerns, and the typographic composition would be overseen by Arquimedes. The narrator’s role was to coordinate the overall process and present the essential technical data related to agriculture and livestock. The book’s release in the press would be facilitated through paid articles in *The Gazeta*, a local newspaper from Viçosa..

4.2 The money-making machine

Paulo Mendes da Rocha once remarked that, regardless of the type of dwelling a person inhabits—whether a mansion or a wooden shack—one truly feels at home only when, looking out of their window, they catch the aroma of freshly brewed coffee or the scent of freshly laundered clothes.

In this observation by the Brazilian architect and Pritzker Prize laureate, we encounter a conception of home that transcends its material function as a structure providing protection from the scorching sun or heavy rain. The home emerges as a locus where our humanity is reaffirmed. It serves not only to protect but also to warm our bodies and our spirits. The term “warm” is particularly evocative here, as it invites a reflection on Vitruvius, who associated the early use of fire as a tool with the simultaneous emergence of community. This nascent sense of communal life relied on language as a means to unite human groups under a shared roof that offered both protection and a sense of belonging [12].

For Paulo Honório, whether the house warms the soul holds no significance. His sole concern lies in its potential to augment his wealth. During his negotiation with Luís Padilha for the acquisition of the São Bernardo farm, the narrator observes with indifference: “For him, São Bernardo’s sole value was sentimental: it’s where he came to hide his bitterness and brokenness, kill small birds, take a dip in the creek, and sleep” [13].

Later, as a successful and established owner, Honório hosts a dinner attended by guests, including Father Silvestre and Azevedo Gondim. The former, struck by the beauty of the surroundings, remarks: “It really must be delightful to live in this paradise. Such beauty!” To this, Honório replies curtly: “For outsiders. We’re used to it here. In the final analysis, I’m not cultivating all this for decoration. It’s to sell.” Gondim, intrigued, probes further: “Even the flowers?” Honório responds with characteristic pragmatism: “Everything. Flowers, vegetables, fruits...” [14].

4.3 The alliance with capital

The reader of this text may have noticed my particular predilection for the significance of words. In Portuguese, the term “aliança” (alliance) can denote both an agreement between two or more countries, institutions, businesses, or individuals, as well as a wedding ring. For Paulo Honório, marriage is assumed to be a business alliance [15]:

One day, I woke up thinking about marriage—an idea that came to me without a single skirt swishing by. I did not pay much heed to romance, as you may have noted. It always seemed to me that a woman was a strange beast, difficult to control. But what I woke up feeling wasn't an inclination toward any of them: I wanted an heir for São Bernardo.

The chosen consort by Paulo Honório to carry out this economic transaction was Madalena, a primary school teacher who lived with her aunt in Viçosa. The first proposal was rejected by the teacher. In the second attempt, Madalena, although leaning toward acceptance, requests more time, as she does not love her suitor: “It appears we understand each other. I always wanted to live in the country, get up early, have a garden. There is a garden there, right? But why can't you wait just a little longer? To be honest, I'm not in love” [16].

The man promptly responds: “Come on! If you'd said you were, I wouldn't have believed you. Anyway, I don't like it when people fall in love with each other and do things blindly. Especially things like this. Let's set a day.” The teacher retreats, asking for more time—another year to think. The farmer retorts: “A year? An agreement that comes due in a year doesn't even count. What do you need? A white dress can be made in twenty-four hours” [17]. Ultimately, Paulo Honório closes the deal: the teacher accepts his proposal.

4.4 Madalena and the ethics of care

For Madalena, marriage symbolizes her entry into the domain of reification, a concept most profoundly exemplified in Brazilian literature through the character of Paulo Honório. His relentless sense of ownership transforms those around him into mere objects, discarded once their utility—measured solely in terms of profit—has been exhausted.

Karl Marx observed that when the commodity form and the material attributes of labor products begin to mediate interpersonal relationships, life assumes the spectral and surreal quality of interactions between inanimate things. Expanding upon this Marxist critique of a world subsumed by capital, Georg Lukács elaborates on the concept of reification, characterizing it as the pervasive process of objectification whereby even human beings are reduced to the status of mere commodities, stripped of their inherent subjectivity and humanity [18]

The immediate, practical as well as intellectual confrontation of the individual with society, the immediate production and reproduction of life-in which for the individual the commodity structure of all 'things' and their obedience to 'natural laws' is found to exist already in a finished form, as something immutably given-could only take place in the form of rational and isolated acts of exchange between isolated commodity owners. As emphasized above, the worker, too, must present himself as the 'owner' of his labor-power, as if it were a commodity. His specific situation is defined by the fact that his labor-power is his only possession. His fate is typical of society as a

whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation.

Capital has neither body nor soul, yet it subjugates those who possess both. Against the merciless capitalist machinery that ruthlessly grinds everything, only a life guided by an ethical praxis rooted in affection and oriented toward collective well-being offers the possibility of resisting and transcending the injustices inherent in capitalist societies.

In Yoruba thought, only an ethic grounded in affection and deeply attuned to the lived realities of individuals—a set of values that prioritizes the prosperity of each person—can ensure the happiness of the entire community and, by extension, safeguard the sanctity of human life [19]:

Yorùbá have a human-based system of ethics, that is, a system of ethics in which everything revolves around the wellness of human beings. Theirs is not an abstract notion of good that bears no practical relation to human concerns. All ethical considerations have human beings as the center of attraction. In other words, the strongest motivation to act morally is to preserve the sanctity of humanity either in one's own case or in others.

The ethics of care began to take shape in the 1980s with the publication of two seminal works: *In a Different Voice* (1982) by Carol Gilligan and *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984) by Nel Noddings. Drawing on Noddings' concepts, I explore the character Madalena in *São Bernardo* as an embodiment of this ethics of affection.

In contrast to the predominantly masculine perspective of moral philosophy, which often confines discussions of justice and moral validity to an impersonal sphere detached from the everyday life of most people, Noddings proposes a feminist ethics. Her approach resonates with Yoruba philosophy, which emphasizes that justice is inseparable from affection. For Noddings, the essence of the ethics of care lies in the relational acts that arise when people interact with one another: "Relations, not individuals, are ontologically basic, and I am using 'caring' to describe a certain kind of relation or encounter" [20].

Noddings envisions a type of relationship in which the Other is always central, as care is inherently directed toward them. To care, in this sense, is to embody and enact the lesson of Simone Weil: "Every being cries out silently to be read differently."

The caregiving relationship between two individuals should not be understood as a one-sided contract, where one side exclusively provides care while the other passively receives it. Ideally, there ought to be a mutual exchange of roles between both sides [21]:

The reciprocity in caring relations is not contractual; that is, we do not expect the cared-for to balance the relation by doing what the one-caring (or carer) does. In equal relations, we do expect that, under appropriate conditions, the parties will exchange places as carer and cared-for. The world is not divided into carers and cared-fors as separate and permanent classes. We are all inevitably cared-fors at many times and, ideally, most of us are carers.

The concept of care, as articulated by Noddings, emerges as a norm rooted in the experience of motherhood, yet it transcends the exclusive realm of mothers. Women,

regardless of their social roles, cultivate a mode of thinking anchored in tangible reality, distinct from the abstract constructs typical of masculine moral reasoning. The ethics of care represents a moral framework founded on connection with others, receptivity, and responsiveness.

In a world reduced solely to its exchange value, Madalena becomes a dissenting voice of compassion and concern. She is deeply disturbed by the violence Paulo Honório employs in his treatment of workers and refuses to accept it. When the landowner assaults Marciano, one of São Bernardo's laborers, she confronts him: "It's horrible!... What barbarity! Completely uncalled for!... What kind of man hits a living creature like that?" [22].

Madalena considers the wages paid to Mr. Ribeiro, Honório's accountant, to be too low, a concern that surprises her husband, who cannot understand her behavior. To Honório, it is simply pragmatic, if inhumane, to adopt measures that preserve and increase the profits of his São Bernardo estate.

Madalena, with her sense of justice and her empathetic concern for the living conditions of the estate's workers, resists the reification that dominates São Bernardo, thereby challenging Paulo Honório's authority. His inability to control his wife's defiance evolves into an obsessive desire for possession [23].

As Madalena escapes his control, expressing compassion for the impoverished workers on the estate and distancing herself from his proprietary worldview, she transcends his comprehension. In response, Paulo Honório is consumed by jealousy.

Ultimately, unable to alter Paulo Honório's behavior or break free from the oppressive violence of his reified world, Madalena takes her own life. The reified world triumphs—care ceases to exist in São Bernardo, a reality even Honório acknowledges after her death: "The little children, in their cold, damp huts, would be swollen with worms. And Madalena would not be here to send them medicine and milk. Men and women are sad creatures" [24].

5. A land without milk and honey

I have heard, for I know its pain. And I have come down to rescue it from the hand of Egypt and to bring it up from that land to a goodly and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8)

For Josué de Castro, everything in the Brazilian Northeast hinterland—from its topography and soil characteristics to its economy and social life—undeniably reflects the profound influence of water scarcity in this semiarid region. It is a geography of extremes, where prolonged droughts coexist with brief moments of torrential rainfall [25]:

All of the natural landscape — from the topography, soil characteristics, vegetation, fauna, economy, and social life of the region — bears the unmistakable mark of water scarcity, of the unpredictable presence of water in this semi-desert region. The sandy soil, thin and nearly always nutrient-poor, rich in rolled pebbles, is a product of extreme climatic conditions: long periods of excessive sunlight followed by sudden downpours that erode the sandstone rocks and accelerate the processes of disintegration within them. The barren ground in certain areas, almost devoid of any arable soil and exposing the skeletal rocks beneath, which emerge sporadically as jagged white ridges, illustrates the relentless agrofagic power of the climate — its capacity to strip the land of its fertility, exposing the hardest cores of its granite and limestone skeleton.

This is a desolate land, offering little to its inhabitants during the prolonged drought periods. Under the intense sun and with the near-total absence of rainfall, rivers evaporate with impressive speed, causing extreme fluctuations in water salinity, rendering it hostile to fish life. The meager pastures, insufficient to sustain the cattle, whose carcasses are scattered across the dry landscape, provide little more than food for vultures. It is a land indelibly marked by hunger [26]:

The hunger epidemics in these calamitous periods are not limited to the more discrete and tolerable forms of partial famine or specific deficiencies found in other regions previously studied. These are epidemics of global, quantitative, and qualitative hunger, reaching with incredible violence the limits of malnutrition and acute starvation

Even during the brief rainy season, the geography offers no respite to the countryman, who must pour all their energy into extracting whatever sustenance the land, revived by the rains, can provide, leaving them with little time or strength to think of anything beyond survival: “The effort they make to obtain the fruits of this fleeting abundance is titanic, consuming him entirely, leaving no time or energy to attend to other essential aspects of life” [27].

It is on this harsh land that we first encounter the characters of the novel, making their way in search of a place that can offer them rest, a morsel of food, and a drop of water. Fabiano, Sinhá Vitória, the older boy, the younger boy, and the dog Baleia drag themselves, exhausted and hungry, in search of refuge, the weight of the sun and hunger pressing heavily upon their shoulders [28]:

Slowly they dragged themselves in that direction. Vitória carried the younger boy astride her hip and the tin trunk on top of her head. Fabiano stumbled along gloomily, a haversack slung by its strap across his chest, a drinking gourd hanging by a thong from his belt, and a flintlock resting on his shoulder. The older boy and Baleia straggled along behind.

The depiction of the region by Josué de Castro in the aforementioned passages is both precise and vivid. Through the intricate details he provides, the reader is made to feel as though they are viewing the drought-stricken Northeast through a magnifying glass. Graciliano Ramos, by contrast, evokes the landscape of the backlands with minimalist precision, describing only the most essential elements of the environment: “The jujube trees spread in two green stains across the reddish plain”; “The foliage of the jujubes loomed in the distance, through the bare twigs of the sparse brush”; “The brushland stretched in every direction, its vaguely reddish hue broken only by white heaps of dry bones. Vultures flew in black circles over dying animals” [29].

Ramos’s writing is defined by its conciseness. For him, words should be stripped of ornamentation, as their primary function is to convey meaning, not to dazzle like false gold. Otto Maria Carpeaux best captured this rigor in the work of the Alagoan writer [30]:

He is very meticulous. He wants to eliminate everything that is not essential: the picturesque descriptions, the clichés of ready-made phrases, the biased eloquence. He would even be capable of eliminating entire pages, eliminating his novels, eliminating the very world itself.

The minimal attention that Graciliano gives to the landscape reflects his intent to focus exclusively on the human condition, engaged in a titanic struggle against a hostile environment and the injustices that surround them [31]:

I sought to listen to the soul of this rough and almost primitive being who lives in the most remote part of the backlands, to observe the reaction of this crude spirit to the outside world, that is, the hostility of the physical world and human injustice.

Contrary to what common sense suggests, and as the writer knows, hunger in the Northeast is not merely a result of climatic conditions. Its roots also lie in the political and social realities of Brazil, as noted by Milton Santos in his preface to Josué de Castro's book [32]:

The limited food consumption on certain occasions was primarily due to the widespread poverty among the population, who were unable to transport food products to their homes and lacked the means to flee to other areas, as they had no roads, transportation, or, more simply, money to purchase provisions.

The social and economic oppression imposed by the ruling class on the countrymen is most forcefully depicted in *Barren Lives* in the chapter "Accounts," which details the moment when Fabiano goes to collect his wages for the work he has performed. On the day of payment, the landowner makes the calculations: he counts the days, adds here, subtracts there, and informs the worker of the amount to be paid.

The day before, Sinhá Vitória had already done the math for her husband's monthly earnings. The values provided by the landowner are lower than those calculated by the woman. The farmer explains that the difference is due to the fees. This is a concept that is abstract and incomprehensible to Fabiano. The cowboy senses that something is amiss and suggests that there must be an error. The landowner becomes enraged at what he perceives as insolence from the worker—if he is dissatisfied, he should seek employment elsewhere. Fear forces Fabiano to retreat and accept the amount offered [33].

The humiliated and offended people of the Northeast drylands, embodied in the family of migrants in *Barren Lives*, inhabit a post-Edenic world of fall and degradation, as aptly described by Hermenegildo Bastos. This world, Bastos adds, is not the same as the one in which the workers on the São Bernardo farm live, who are integrated into the capitalist process of modern labor division. Sinhá Vitória and Fabiano's family exist within the capitalist framework, but in a more archaic form of relationship [34, 35].

5.1 The thinking of the rough man and the attention

Brazilian subaltern groups have long been marginalized, often regarded with a blend of contempt and prejudice by a substantial segment of the nation's society. In stark contrast, Graciliano Ramos directs a gaze toward his characters that is entirely different [36]:

However little the savage may think — and my characters are almost savages — what he thinks deserves to be noted. It was this psychological research that I sought to conduct, research that regionalist writers do not do and cannot even do, because they are typically unfamiliar with the backlands and the environment they describe.

Born in Quebrangulo and raised in Buíque, two towns in Brazil's semi-arid Northeast, Graciliano grew up among those he would later depict in *Barren lives*. As a child, he witnessed these "nearly savage beings" and captured their humanity

with profound sensitivity. In a society like Brazilian society, where academic education often serves as a tool of oppression, reinforcing the privileges of the dominant classes, intellectuals like the former mayor of Palmeira dos Índios are rare. Graciliano transcended the limitations of his own social origins in an earnest effort to comprehend the lives and thoughts of the countrymen. Only a perspective deeply rooted in attention can accomplish such an understanding.

6. Final remarks

Otto Maria Carpeaux, the Brazilian literary critic and historian of Austrian origin, stated that his novels are experiments designed to end the anguished dream of life. Carpeaux further suggests that the Alagoan writer is like a tree offering its shadow to shield us from the traumas inflicted by capitalist Western modernity. The historian borrowed this tree metaphor from Buddhism [37]:

A Buddhist legend recounts the story of a man who, in his desperate attempt to escape his own shadow, ran through the midday sun, constantly pursued by his sinister companion. Eventually, he encountered the Great Sage, who said to him: “Do not continue running! Sit beneath this tree!” And as he paused, the shadow disappeared.

What sort of shadow do we encounter in the work of the author of São Bernardo? Once again, Carpeaux provides the answer [38]:

The shadow over the world Graciliano Ramos creates is not the shadow of the tree of salvation, but that of the construction of our artificial civilization — culture and illiterate literacy, society, city, state, and all temporal and spiritual authorities...

The shadows I have sought to cast upon the writer’s work are the ethical theories of care and attention, as developed by thinkers Nel Noddings and Simone Weil, respectively. The framework elaborated by Noddings allowed me to interpret São Bernardo as an exemplary portrayal of a world in which women are violently oppressed by a patriarchy that refuses to embrace an ethic of care for the other. In the second approach, attention emerges as the means by which the prejudices and stereotypes of the dominant classes can be contested through the inclusive gaze of a writer such as Graciliano Ramos. For a country like Brazil, where its fragile democracy remains under constant threat in the early decades of the twenty-first century, the lessons of the “old Graça” should not be forgotten.

Notes/thanks/other declarations

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This work is dedicated to the cherished memory of Alfredo Bosi and Éclea Bosi, whose influence helped me become a better human being.

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The Life of Shakespeare: The Growth of Literature

Peter Ernest Razzell

Abstract

This essay will explore not only the contribution of Shakespeare to English literature but also discuss biographical research that sheds new light on his life and artistic development. Beyond the well-known accounts provided by Rowe and Malone, recent studies provide insights into Shakespeare's early life, particularly the collaboration with his father in private trading. This aspect of his life significantly shaped his acquisition of cosmopolitan culture, which later became crucial for his work as a playwright. These new findings reflect how historical research continually develops our understanding of literature, with Shakespeare's life becoming a focal point for new ideas. While some of these ideas remain hypothetical, they are grounded in evidence that complements the established narrative, illustrating how literary study itself is an ever-evolving landscape.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, literature, private trading, cosmopolitan culture, John Shakespeare

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's early life has remained something of a conundrum despite extensive research into his background. His writing is universally recognised as an outstanding contribution to the history of literature, yet he was the son of a provincial artisan of limited literacy. His father John Shakespeare was a Stratford glover and unable to provide his son with a full education. This has led to the description of Shakespeare as 'the Stratford boor'¹ [1], accounting for why many scholars are unable to accept that he was the author of his plays. His work has been attributed to an extensive range of people of high social and elite status, including, among others, Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, and Christopher Marlow.² More recently, Lena Cowen has suggested that 'we must picture Shakespeare participating in the intellectual culture of Oxford ... Shakespeare is nearly certain to have taken in lectures and sermons in college chapels'³ [2]. Again, this is pure speculation without any convincing evidence to support it.

¹ S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 1992, p. viii.

² Ibid, pp. 385–451.

³ L. C. Orlin, *The Private Life of William Shakespeare*, 2021, p. 248.

The problem is that scholars are unable to accept that the son of a provincial artisan with limited education could have been the author of the plays, and most have invented classical sources to address this conundrum. But as Ben Jonson argued, Shakespeare ‘had little Latin and less Greek,’ and did not adhere to classical rules in writing his plays. However, he showed a unique understanding of vernacular language in creating both his comedies and tragedies.

There is also the conundrum of where Shakespeare went after he fathered three children in Stratford before appearing in London, which has been designated as the “lost years”. Some have speculated that he spent this period on the continent of Europe or other places enabling him to acquire the sophisticated culture necessary for the writing of the plays.⁴ None of these ideas have any credible evidence to support them but there is evidence in plain sight to resolve these difficulties.

According to Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare worked for his father after he left school at an early age: ‘Upon his leaving School, he seems to have given intirely into the way of Living which his Father propos’d to him ... tho’ he was his eldest Son, he could give him no better Education than his own Employment ...’⁵ [3]. What other biographers have not realised is that John Shakespeare was not just a glover but was a private trader involving participation in a highly sophisticated and metropolitan community.

Nicholas Rowe’s *Life of Shakespeare* was the first full biography of Shakespeare, published in 1709.⁶ It was largely based on information provided by the actor Thomas Betterton, who made a special visit to Stratford to collect information on Shakespeare’s life. Rowe also used material reputed to have originated from Sir William Davenant, rumoured to be the natural son of Shakespeare.

The biography has attracted a great deal of criticism⁷ [4], much of it based on Edmund Malone’s work on Shakespeare. As Schoenbaum has written, ‘it is largely through Malone’s achievement the inadequacies of Rowe’s essay were now recognised’⁸ [5]. Given the importance of Rowe’s biography, I will be evaluating Malone’s criticisms of Rowe where they are subject to checks using economic, social, and demographic research, as well as documentary sources on the lives of both Shakespeare and his father John. There has been a proliferation of biographies on Shakespeare’s life—Nicholl claimed that ‘there have been many hundreds of them’⁹—as well as resulting controversies and speculations. Given the latter, I will wherever possible rely on published documentary sources which I will quote fully, but with an acknowledgement of different interpretations of these sources.

This essay will also examine issues beyond the different biographical accounts written by Rowe and Malone. This includes Shakespeare’s work with his father in private trading and its influence on his acquisition of the cosmopolitan culture necessary for his later work as a playwright. This research has generated radical new ideas about

⁴ Ibid, p. 441.

⁵ N. Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, 2009, pp. 26, 28.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ K. Duncan Jones, *Shakespeare: An Ungentle Life*, 2010, p. 97; Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, p. 7.

⁸ S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare’s Lives*, 2006, p. 169.

⁹ Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, p. 7.

Shakespeare's life, some of which are necessarily of a hypothetical nature, but based on sources consistent with known evidence.

2. The reliability of parish registers

Malone implied that Rowe relied exclusively on information derived from the Stratford parish register. Yet as Schoenbaum has pointed out, 'the identity of the poet's bride, first published by Rowe,' was only unequivocally confirmed in September 1836 by a marriage bond of 28 November 1582.¹⁰ It therefore appears that Betterton managed to obtain information from local sources beyond the information in the Stratford parish register. Also, Rowe stated that John Shakespeare was 'a considerable Dealer in Wool,'¹¹ and it is only in the last few years that this statement has been documented in research into legal documents.¹²

Malone also assumed that parish registers were a reliable source of information on births and deaths and believed that John Shakespeare only had eight children. New research, however, has established that between a fifth and a third of all deaths and births in the period 1550–1650 were omitted from parish registers, due to the unreliable practices of clergymen and their clerks¹³ [6, 7]. This was probably true of the Stratford parish register, indicated by the omission of the burial of John Shakespeare's first daughter Joan, who had a sibling of the same name baptised at a later date.

The poor quality of parish registration is suggested by the practices of John Frith the local clergyman of Temple Grafton, the location of Shakespeare's marriage ceremony. According to Whitgift's 1586 survey of the Warwickshire ministry: 'John Frith, vicar, an old priest and unsound in religion, he can neither preach nor read well, his chiefest trade is to cure hawks that are hurt or diseased, for which purpose many do usually repair to him.'¹⁴

The quality of birth registration is revealed in the pattern of baptisms of John Shakespeare's children¹⁵ (Table 1) [8]:

The usual gap in births during this period was between two and three years, and yet in the periods 1558–1562, 1569–1574, and 1574–1578, it is in the Shakespeare family between four and five years, suggesting the possibility of some missing births. Although not conclusive, it indicates that Nicholas Rowe may have been right about John Shakespeare's ten children.

¹⁰ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 192.

¹¹ N. Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, p. 26.

¹² It should also be noted that the monument to Shakespeare in the Stratford Church did not originally depict him with a quill in his hand, but merely had him resting on a woolsack—which, according to Nicholl, made him look 'more a wool merchant than a poet.' Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, pp. 74, 75.

¹³ P. E. Razzell, *Mortality, Marriage and Population in England, 1550–1850*, 2016, pp. 18–21; P.E. Razzell, The measurement of the reliability of parish registration through same-name methodology, *Academia Online*.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁵ E. Malone, J. Boswell., editors. *The Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare*, pp. 610, 611.

Name	Baptism date	Year	Burial date
Jone	15th September	1558	
Margaret	2nd Decembe	1562	30th April 1563
William	26th April	1564	
Gilbert	13th October	1566	
Jone	15th April	1569	
Richard	11th March	1574	
Anne	28th September	1578	4th April 1579
Edmund	3rd May	1580	

Table 1.
Baptisms and burials in John Shakespeare's family.

3. John Shakespeare as wool dealer and private trader

Edmund Malone was not fully aware of John Shakespeare's activities as a dealer in wool and challenged the designation of him as a "woolman". He knew that John Shakespeare was a member of the Stratford council in the late 1550s and 1560s, occupying all roles in the council from borough constable to mayor¹⁶ [9]. However, four legal cases involving John Shakespeare came to light in the Exchequer court, chronicled by D.L. Thomas and N.E. Evans in their article 'John Shakespeare in the Exchequer.' They reveal that the Stratford glover was engaged in subsidiary wool dealings and money-lending transactions, which indicated that John Shakespeare was a dealer in wool on a large scale¹⁷ [10, 11]. An informer revealed that in 1572, John "Shaxspere" of "Stretford super Haven" and John Lockesley of the same place had illegally bought 200 tods (i.e. 5600 pounds) of wool, and later that year John Shakespeare was accused of buying 100 tods of wool.¹⁸

At an earlier date on the 4th November 1568, John Shakespeare alleged that he had sold John Walford twenty-one tods of wool at Stratford and that £21 owing in cash had never been paid.¹⁹ It is likely that John Shakespeare traded wool on other occasions, which did not result in prosecutions.

According to Bowden in his study of the wool trade in Tudor and Stuart England, glovers dealt in wool by removing wool in the preparation of the sheep skins. John Shakespeare also traded in a variety of other products: according to Lee, 'he soon set up as a trader in all manner of agricultural produce. Corn, wool, malt, meat, skins, and leather were among the commodities in which he dealt'²⁰ [12]. He had dealings

¹⁶ F.E. Halliday, *A Shakespeare Companion 1564–1964*, pp. 441.

¹⁷ D.L. Thomas and N.E. Evans, 'John Shakespeare in the Exchequer,' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35 (1984), pp. 315–18; P.E. Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, 1990 [Available on *Academia Online*], pp. 17–18.

¹⁸ Thomas and Evans, 'John Shakespeare in the Exchequer'; Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, p. 17, 18.

¹⁹ Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, p. 19.

²⁰ S. Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare*, 1898, Cambridge University Press edition 2012, p. 4.

with people living in London, Worcestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Coventry, Nottingham, and Stoke in Staffordshire.²¹

Nicholas Rowe's description of John Shakespeare as a "considerable dealer in wool" is appropriate given his activities as a wool dealer, but does not allow for the diversity of the business activities that he was engaged in. Rowe's illustration of Shakespeare's monument in Stratford church was based on Dugdale's *Antiquities* and depicts Shakespeare resting on a woolsack without the quill introduced at a later date. As Nicholl has written, this makes Shakespeare 'more a wool merchant than a poet.'²² The monument may have been commissioned by Shakespeare's grand-daughter Elizabeth Barnard or even possibly by Shakespeare himself during his own lifetime.²³ People living in Stratford at that time appear to have seen Shakespeare as more of a businessman than a dramatist, consistent with the fact that only about a half of the plays were published in his lifetime. This suggests that his literary reputation was not a priority for Shakespeare.

4. John Shakespeare's economic and cultural world

In the court case against the Lambert family in 1588, John Shakespeare claimed for a missing twenty pounds he had 'totally lost and failed to acquire the whole gain, advantage, and profit which he by buying and bargaining with the aforesaid twenty pounds have had and acquired, to the loss of thirty pounds'²⁴ [13].

This is the credo—"buying and bargaining"—of the middleman, a group whose activities Everitt has designated as 'the free trading between individuals,' defined as the 'type of bargaining which was mostly "free," or emancipated from official control: to dealing between individual traders and manufacturers in private'²⁵ [14]. Most of the leading townsmen of Stratford were private traders and were engaged in the illegal trading of corn,²⁶ and private trading was ubiquitous in Stratford in the late sixteenth century.²⁷

In order to understand the rise of private and illegal trading, it is necessary to understand the economic conditions of the time. The population had grown very rapidly in the late sixteenth century, and largely as a result, prices of all commodities had risen very sharply, including wool, barley, and other foodstuffs.²⁸ Using an index of wool prices, it had increased as follows: 1450–99 = 100; 1550–59 = 206; 1590–99 = 315.²⁹ The price of arable produce trebled between 1530 and 59 and 1590–1619, whereas cattle and oxen more than doubled during the same period.³⁰ This

²¹ Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, p. 20.

²² Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, 71.

²³ See the Wikipedia entry on Shakespeare's monument.

²⁴ B. Rowland Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents: Facsimiles, Transliterations, Translations and Commentary*. Volume 1, p. 139.

²⁵ J. Chartres (ed), *Agricultural Markets and Trade, 1500–1750: Chapters from the Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 1990, p. 92.

²⁶ Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, p. 284.

²⁷ For example, 120 of the leading townsmen in Stratford—including Shakespeare—illegally hoarded grain in 1598. Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*. p. 284.

²⁸ Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, pp. 11, 12.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

had allowed those with capital to exploit these price rises, resulting in the forestalling of grain and speculation in other commodities. As Lewis observed ‘those who had ready funds “engrossed and forestalled” ... and by holding in bulk ... the engrosses and forestallers forced the price rapidly upwards.’³¹ The wet seasons of 1594, 1595, and 1596 exacerbated these price rises,³² leading to great distress and riots among the poor³³ [15].

As a result of a general agitation, the Privy Council required local authorities to make a note of corn and malt in their towns. On February 4, 1598 a return of illegal trading in malt was made in Stratford, and more than one hundred and twenty names appear, including that of Shakespeare, his friends Adrian Quiney and Richard Sturley, as well as the four local landed magistrates.³⁴ What the rioters did not realise was that the local magistrates that they appealed to were some of the leading engrosses of grain, and that all the leading townsmen were private traders engaged in the illegal trade.

Everitt has shown that this type of trading grew rapidly in the sixteenth century, particularly after about 1570. Only about a third of country-wide private transactions took place in the same county in the Midland region,³⁵ consistent with the pattern of John Shakespeare’s trading disputes.

All transactions were conducted on a credit basis, for which legal bonds were drawn up by a lawyer or scrivener.³⁶ According to Everitt, because of the absence of banks, traders necessarily had to rely on their credit in the local community, and this often ‘operated through a network of neighbours, friends, and relatives. Sons, fathers, brothers, cousins, wives, uncles, mothers, brother-in-law: all were drawn into the circle.’³⁷

He has described the culture which grew up among individual traders:

In consequence of this network of kinship and acquaintance, the packmen, carriers, woolmen, and factors who engaged in the private agricultural market were not simply unconnected individuals ... Much of the dealing in which travelling merchants engaged took place in farmhouses. Some took place in barns, and some in warehouses and corn-chambers. Perhaps the most characteristic meeting place of the wayfaring community, however, was the provincial inn. The Elizabethan inn has no exact counterpart in the modern world. It was the hotel, the bank, the warehouse, the exchange, the scrivener’s office, and the marketplace of many of a trader³⁸

Everitt has elaborated on the role of the innkeeper in trading activities:

The Tudor and Stuart innkeeper was thus in a powerful position to influence the course of private trading. Many a publican provided cellars or outbuildings for the storage of

³¹ Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, p. 282.

³² Ibid.

³³ The increase in population also resulted in a surplus of labour, which led to poverty and unemployment. In a corporation petition in 1601, it was stated that in Stratford, ‘our poor are in number seven hundred and odd, young and old,’ about 40% of Stratford’s population. See E. Fripp, *Master Richard Quiney*, 1924, p. 177.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 284.

³⁵ Chartres, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 99.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 93.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 106.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 107, 108.

his client's goods. Some converted their halls or parlours into private auction rooms ... Agreement between prospective dealers was rarely reached without a lengthy series of "speeches" and "communications", and the company often sat far into the night before the transaction was concluded. Sometimes an unscrupulous innkeeper would allow some hapless yeoman (well plied with ale) to be "cozened of his money" by the "glozing terms ... smooth words, and fair speeches" of the other party concerned ... When the bargain was agreed, the local scrivener (sometimes himself one of the guests) was called upon to draw up one of the bonds, and the deed was read out to the assembled company ... not infrequently one of the signatories later confessed himself unable to read it³⁹

The problem arose because of the poor educational system. 'Many marketing disputes arose through the illiteracy of one or other of the parties concerned.'⁴⁰ Many of the traders were helped by assistants, who 'undertook the writings of his order books, notes, and letters ...'⁴¹ Because of the writing involved in trading transactions, the aid of his son William would have been invaluable to the semi-literate John Shakespeare. As Everitt has concluded, 'with the growth of private dealing some grounding in writing and accounting was imperative.'⁴² Lena Orlin has argued

For property transactions, wholesale operations, and other aspirational ventures, records and documents were vital. At Stratford's grammar school, William Shakespeare developed skills that were useful to an upwardly mobile family. By the time he was 10, he may have thought of himself as his father's partner.'⁴³

There is some independent evidence to support Rowe's statement that Shakespeare worked with his father, and it involves the dispute about the purchase of land in Wilmcote that John Shakespeare had with his brother-in-law Edmund Lambert and his son John. The dispute is highly complex, and it is discussed in detail in my book on Shakespeare.⁴⁴ The following is an extract from the court proceedings relevant to the evidence of William Shakespeare's part and status in the dispute.

On the first day of March [1587] ... he [Edmund Lambert] died ... after whose death ... [the land] descended to the aforesaid John Lambert, as son and heir of the said Edmund ... the said John Shakespeare his wife Mary together with William Shakespeare their son, when claim had been made upon them, covenanted the said [land] ... to said John Lambert and ... delivered all writings and proofs concerning the said premises ... besides that, he, the same John Shakespeare, and Mary his wife, at the same time with William Shakespeare their son, have always been ready hitherto not only for covenanting the aforesaid premises but also for delivering to the same John Lambert all writings and proofs concerning the same'⁴⁵

³⁹ Ibid, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 115.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 104.

⁴² Ibid, p. 116.

⁴³ L. Orlin, *The Private Life*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ See 'The Shakespeare/Lambert Dispute' in Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, pp. 35–45.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, pp. 138, 139.

This is evidence that Shakespeare was still working with his father in 1587 and 1588, providing assistance to his father who was only semi-literate. His role appears to have been mainly helping with the delivery and working on written records, invaluable assistance to his father at this time. However, this interpretation has been disputed by E.K. Chambers:

*This is the only reference to Shakespeare in the litigation conducted by his parent about the property concerned ... William, probably in respect of some right of inheritance, was a party to this, but the negotiation was apparently oral and would not necessarily entail his presence at Stratford*⁴⁶ [16].

There is little evidence that the negotiation was oral⁴⁷, and in any event, William Shakespeare's involvement appears to be concerned with references to writing. Also importantly, both parties to the dispute referred to "heirs and assigns" when the inheritance of property was at issue, whereas William Shakespeare is mainly linked to the submission of written documents. Also, I believe Chambers has misread the nature of the dispute: John Shakespeare was not attempting to reclaim the land but was trying to extract extra money from John Lambert who had only recently inherited the property.⁴⁸ In effect, he was trying to cheat John Lambert out of £20, at a time when John Shakespeare appeared to have been poverty-stricken and looking for extra sources of income.⁴⁹

Having his son help with writing would have been invaluable to John Shakespeare. As Schoenbaum has written: 'From all the documentary evidence, John Shakespeare was not fully literate. Invariably the documents ... [he] signed either with his mark or with a pictogram ... The fully literate – even those who had become infirm or senile – tended to make a simple scrawl for their signatures rather than crosses.'⁵⁰

There is evidence that William Shakespeare was very familiar with legal terminology. Fripp argued that he showed 'extraordinary knowledge, and large accurate usage, in his writings from the beginning, of legal terminology and procedure'⁵¹ [17]. The suggestion made by Malone—who was a barrister—that the dramatist spent some years as a lawyer's clerk, was also supported by other lawyers.⁵² It is probable that Shakespeare acquired his legal knowledge working for his father in drafting legal documents in trading transactions.

Also, it makes it much more comprehensible as to how Shakespeare acquired the linguistic and cultural knowledge to write plays of such universal and general appeal. It has always puzzled historians how he acquired the knowledge to write such plays, but by participating in meetings in inns in London and elsewhere on trading expeditions, with a 'lengthy series of "speeches" and "communications" far into the night,

⁴⁶ E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, Volume 2 (1930), p. 37.

⁴⁷ John Shakespeare claimed that John Lambert had promised at Stratford to pay £20 for additional evidence for security of title to the Wilmcote property, to be paid in instalments at the manor house of Anthony Ingram in Little Walford. There is evidence that these meetings never took place, as the legal documents reveal that John Lambert already had security of title. See 'The Shakespeare/Lambert Dispute' in Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, pp. 35–45.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See p. 11.

⁵⁰ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 2006, p. 292.

⁵¹ E. Fripp, *Shakespeare: Man and Artist*, Volume 1, page 138.

⁵² Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 332.

and “smooth words, and fair speeches” helps to resolve this conundrum. Everitt makes it clear that these traders were highly cosmopolitan: ‘the wayfaring community developed an ethos of its own dissimilar to that of the settled society of town and village. Its spirit of speculation and adventure ran counter to the stable traditions of the English peasantry.’⁵³ This culture provided Shakespeare with both the knowledge and background necessary for his theatrical and business career.

He would also have been exposed to theatres in London and elsewhere as he travelled around the country with his father. Inns were often centres of theatrical productions⁵⁴ [18, 19] and he probably encountered them throughout the so-called ‘lost years,’ preparing him for both his future work as a playwright and his career as an astute businessman. There is also evidence that Shakespeare may have encountered theatre companies directly during his working life with his father. Michael Wood has documented a case where wool dealing and a theatrical production coincided in 1587:

*‘In mid-June 1587 ... the Queen’s Men were on tour in Oxfordshire, rolling their waggon of props and costumes into the wool town of Thame ... at the time of the sheep clip in June the place was full of wool buyers and others; it was a good time to play, and it was visited by many travelling companies ... There were inns for travellers at the east end ... Here the Queen’s Men played on 13 June ... in the yard of an inn called the White Hand.’*⁵⁵

It is likely that Shakespeare encountered the Queen’s Men in different inns as he and his father travelled the country on wool-buying expeditions. Inns were widely used for theatrical productions during this period, and it was during sheep shearing in June and other times that travelling players gravitated to these locations to maximise revenue. This explains why theatrical companies were so keen to locate their travelling productions during sheep fairs and times of wool shearing, such as that at Thame. Shakespeare probably encountered The Queen’s Men in inns and other venues, which might explain why four of the company’s plays were forerunners to Shakespeare’s later writing. According to Pauline Montague, these plays were ‘*The Troublesome Regn of King John*, *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, *The Famous Victories of Henery V*, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters*, *Gonorill*, *Ragan and Cordelia*.’ She concluded that ‘these plays ... are actually among the repertoire of the Queen’s Men and Shakespeare’s own plays show such an intimate knowledge of these and other of their repertoire, in some cases even before they were published, that several biographers believe that Shakespeare may have been a member of the Queen’s Men early in his career’⁵⁶ [20].

5. The earl of Southampton and the gift of £1000

Rowe wrote:

⁵³ Chartes, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 111.

⁵⁴ See Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* 1987, p. 131; Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, 2005, p. 134. See the picture of Green Dragon Inn.

⁵⁵ Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, p. 112. See also p. 143 for a picture of such a provincial inn.

⁵⁶ Pauline Montagna, ‘William Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men,’ *Shakespeare and His World/The Elizabethan Theatre*, 2002 Online.

*He [Shakespeare] had the Honour to meet with many great and uncommon Marks of Favour and Friendship from the Earl of Southampton ... There is one Instance so singular in the Magnificence of this Patron of Shakespear's, that if I had not been assur'd that the Story was handed down by Sir William D'Avenant, who was probably very well acquainted with his Affairs, I should not have ventur'd to have inserted, that my Lord Southampton, at one time, gave him a thousand Pounds, to enable him to go through with a Purchase, which he heard he had a mind to.*⁵⁷

Malone challenged this account, but clarification of Shakespeare's financial activities is provided by the financial expert David Fallow, who examined them in his doctoral thesis. He analysed the source of Shakespeare's income from his theatrical work and other sources:

*... Playing companies such as The King's Men bought plays outright, paying around £6 for each work ... Shakespeare's averages two plays per year adding another £20 to his income.*⁵⁸ [21]. *A net £60 per annum would have supported a comfortable, but not extravagant, lifestyle but it would not, by any stretch of the imagination, paid for the stream of investment he made between 1597 and 1613*⁵⁹ [22].

Given that he did not earn the money for his investments from his theatrical work, this suggests that he must have had alternative sources of income, including gifts from the Earl of Southampton. As we have seen in addition to the thousand pounds, Rowe wrote that Shakespeare met 'with many great and uncommon Marks of Favour and Friendship from the Earl of Southampton,' which could have included much more modest sums of money.

Southampton fell out with his guardian Lord Burghley, who had wanted him to marry Burghley's grand-daughter, but Southampton refused and Burghley used his power as Master of the Wards to fine him £5000, which indicates the scale of Southampton's wealth.⁶⁰ He was highly attracted to the theatre and in a letter dated at the end of 1599, it was stated that he failed to go to court but passed 'away the time in London *merely in going to plays every day.*'⁶¹

With the evidence of the relationship between Shakespeare and Southampton, and the latter's wealth and spendthrift nature, it is feasible that he did give Shakespeare a thousand pounds and other gifts. It explains how Shakespeare managed to purchase investments between 1597 and 1605, totalling a thousand pounds, and contradicting Malone's claim that there was no evidence that Shakespeare purchased property on this scale.

6. The poaching of deer and exile

Included in Rowe's biography was an account of how Shakespeare was forced to leave the work with his father, as a result of the poaching of deer from Sir Thomas Lucy's park:

⁵⁷ N. Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, pp. 37, 38.

⁵⁸ D. Fallow, 'Where Did Shakespeare's Money Come From,' *Online*.

⁵⁹ D. Fallow, *John and William Shakespeare-The Sources and Acquisition of their Wealth*, p. 96.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Malone, Boswell, editors. *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, p. 477.

The essential story of poaching, capture, prosecution, and flight has survived in at least three separate versions—those of Davies, Rowe, and Jones.⁶² They were independent of each other and unaware of alternative accounts.

The assumption of Rowe's version of the poaching incident is that it occurred at Charlecote, the manor house of Sir Thomas Lucy. But in the later eighteenth century, claims were made that it took place at Fulbrook Park, two miles distant from Charlecote.⁶³ The poaching incident was used by Shakespeare in the autobiographical play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He made Falstaff among other things a deer stealer, and satirised Sir Thomas Lucy as Justice Shallow.⁶⁴

The major difficulty in its acceptance has been until now the absence of any firm evidence for a deer park at Charlecote or Fulbrook at the relevant period.⁶⁵ Malone claimed that there was no evidence for the existence of parks at Charlecote and Fulbrook.⁶⁶ However, the Sheldon Tapestry Map bearing the date 1588—the approximate date of the poaching incident—shows a paling attached to Charlecote, bounded on one side by the river Avon.⁶⁷

There was a cony warren licensed at Charlecote owned by Sir Thomas Lucy. In the final quarter of 1584, a second 'cony keeper' was added to the list in the Charlecote Household Accounts Book. The pattern of two keepers was maintained right through to the end of the record in 1587.⁶⁸ Schoenbaum has clarified the position of deer at Charlecote: 'If fallow deer would not come under the heading of beasts of warren, roe deer would. So the episode could have taken place at Charlecote after all.'⁶⁹

The relevant section of the Sheldon tapestry map is as follows (**Figure 1**):

There appears to be a park at "Wasburton" just east of Snitterfield, which is completely surrounded by palings. and it is precisely where Fulbrook park should be located according to various descriptions. In particular Leland's account: 'I roade from Warwicke to Bareford Bridge ... 2 miles [from Warwick]. Here I sawe halfe a mile lower upon Avon on the right ripe by northe a fayr parke caulled Fulbroke.'⁷⁰

Land at Fulbrook was licensed to Sir Thomas in 1573. The following entry was entered in the Calendar of Patent Rolls for 27 April 1573: 'Licence for Edward Graunt to alienate lands in Fulbroke, co. Warwick, to Thomas Lucy, Knight, John Somervyle and Henry Rogers ...'⁷¹

This licence reads:

The Queen ... granted and gave licence ... to our beloved Edward Grant ... [of] one message, twenty acres of land, forty acres of meadow, three hundred acres of pasture and ten acres of woodland, with appurtenances in Fulbrook ... so that he can give

⁶² Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, p. 103.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 87; Schoenbaum, *Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, pp. 104, 105; Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, pp. 86, 87.

⁶⁴ Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, p. 89, pp. 98, 99.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 89.

⁶⁶ For a full discussion of the poaching incident see Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, pp. 85–120.

⁶⁷ In the Victoria and Albert Museum.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

⁶⁹ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 71.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 106, 112.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 100.

*and grant, alienate ... to beloved and faithful Thomas Lucy Knight and our beloved John Somerville, Esquire and Henry Rogers, Gentleman ...*⁷².

Fulbrook had expanded from one acre of woodland in June 1573 to 100 acres of woods in October 1573, and the area in question was designated as Fulbrook Park.⁷³ It is possible that this was when it was again created as a hunting park, with protective paling. Fulbrook was only a mile or so away from Snitterfield, depicted in the Sheldon Tapestry Map. Snitterfield was the residence of Shakespeare's uncle Henry Shakespeare and the birthplace of his father, and an obvious location for poaching activities.

Malone wrote extensively about the legislation covering the punishment for poaching activities, and he claimed that nowhere did it list that the poaching deer carried out by Shakespeare should be punished severely.⁷⁴ This does not account for the effect of the ballad Shakespeare wrote satirising Sir Thomas. According to Rowe, the ballad 'is said to have been so very bitter, that it redoubled the Prosecution against him.'⁷⁵ This is confirmed by Jones: 'the ballad ... stuck upon his park gate, which exasperated the knight to apply to a lawyer at Warwick to proceed against him.'⁷⁶

The poaching incident may be linked to a period of poverty that John Shakespeare was experiencing during this time. In 1578, he was allowed by Stratford Corporation to pay a reduced contribution for the maintenance of the local militia. Additionally, in the same year, he was exempted from contributing towards the weekly maintenance of the poor.⁷⁷ He was undergoing 'years of adversity',⁷⁸ culminating in 1592 when he avoided church because of a 'feare of process for debte.'⁷⁹ The poaching incident probably occurred in about 1588 and may have been responsible for Shakespeare leaving Stratford. Poaching was not then just a youthful frolic but was linked to a period of poverty and economic hardship.

7. Conclusion: Banishment and resolution of exile

It appears that Shakespeare's banishment as a result of the poaching incident had a profound effect on him. There is an expression in Sonnet 29 of his bitterness at being exiled from his home and family⁸⁰ [23].

*When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcaste state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate.*

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 103.

⁷⁴ Malone, Boswell, editors. *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, pp. 119–147.

⁷⁵ Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, p. 29.

⁷⁶ Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, p. 102.

⁷⁷ Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, pp. 65–67.

⁷⁸ F.E. Halliday, *A Shakespeare Companion 1564–1964*, pp. 441–42.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 2002.

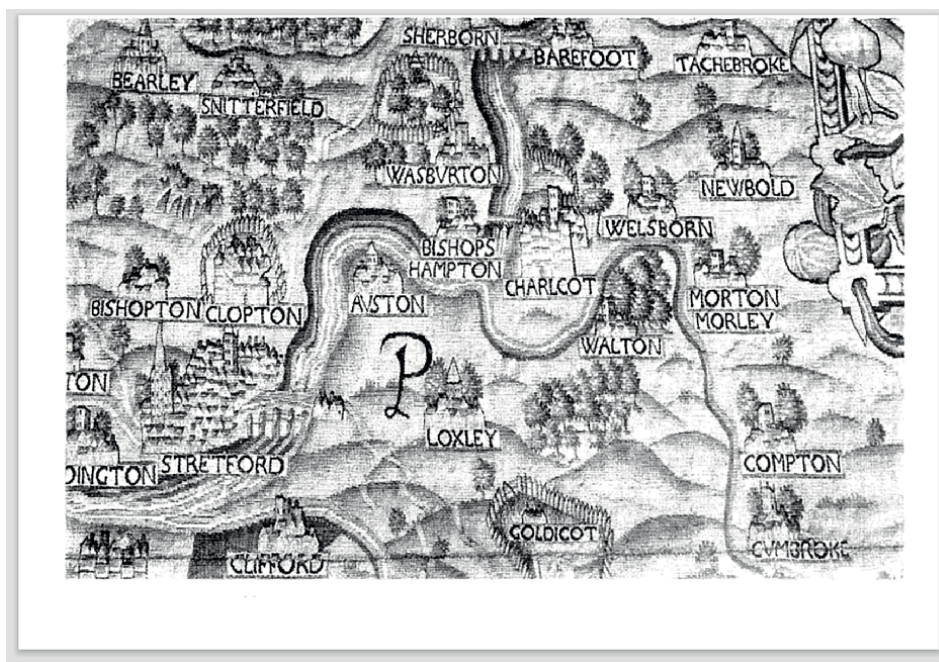


Figure 1.
 Charlecote and surrounding area (From Sheldon Tapestry map of Worcestershire in the Victoria and Albert Museum).

However, he appears to have come to terms with his exile through his writing as a playwright, for as Rowe tells us: “The latter Part of his Life was spent, as all Men of good Sense will wish theirs may be, in Ease, Retirement, and Conversation of his Friends,”⁸¹ reflected perhaps in the following passage from *As You Like It*:

Sweet are the uses of adversity, which like a toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head. And this our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.

⁸¹ Rowe (ed. C. Nicholl), *The Life of Shakespeare*, p. 72.

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Literature as an Art Form – Evolving Intermedial Literary Landscape brings together sixteen scholarly contributions that explore literature's ongoing transformation across media, cultures, and technologies. This anthology traces the dynamic interplay between literature and visual, sonic, performative, and algorithmic forms, ranging from illuminated manuscripts and oral traditions to digital texts and anime. Rejecting the notion of literature as a fixed verbal art, the chapters highlight its status as a transmedial, evolving practice, shaped by and shaping the environments in which it is situated. Each essay examines how literature migrates across modalities, revealing it as a mutable process of techno-poïesis. Together, they offer a compelling vision of literature not as an autonomous artefact, but as a fluid cultural phenomenon whose conditions of existence are inseparable from intermedial exchange.

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