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And Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed  
In dignity, and for the liberal Arts  
Without a parallel; those being all my study,  
The government I cast upon my brother,  
And to my state grew stranger, being transported  
And rapt in secret studies.

W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.ii. 72-77



# Émergence d'une identité judéo-alsacienne. Claude Vigée et ses aïeux

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*Elisabeth Schulz*

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## *Introduction*

L'émergence de l'identité judéo-alsacienne est liée non seulement aux déplacements des frontières entre la France, l'Allemagne et la Suisse mais également à la fin du morcellement interne de l'Alsace. En effet, jusqu'à la Révolution française, les Juifs d'Alsace ont développé beaucoup d'échanges avec leurs confrères d'outre-Rhin. Ensemble ils étudiaient dans des écoles talmudiques et ils possédaient une langue commune: le judéo-allemand. Puis, un tournant a eu lieu au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle quand les Juifs d'Alsace ont cessé de se sentir liés aux autres communautés rhénanes. De surcroît, il semble qu'ils aient progressivement ignoré leur propre histoire même si de nombreuses pratiques rituelles ont été maintenues. C'est ainsi que Claude Vigée raconte que le terme *ashkénaze* (*Le panier* 93) représentait chez eux une insulte disqualifiant leur voisin allemand alors que, sans le savoir, ils constituaient eux-mêmes le tronc *ashkénaze* (Bauer, *Les Juifs ashkénazes* 6).

En fait, l'identité judéo-alsacienne s'est affirmée dans le sillage de l'identité alsacienne. C'est pourquoi certains romans composant le recueil *Gens d'Alsace et de Lorraine*<sup>1</sup> d'Erckmann-Chatrion<sup>2</sup> nous éclairent sur le profil des Juifs d'Alsace tout en élargissant notre perspective à l'ensemble de l'Alsace. En effet, dans un cadre temporel allant des lendemains de la Révolution jusqu'au déclin de Napoléon III, les auteurs Erckmann-Chatrion évoquent la vie quotidienne des habitants de petites villes alsaciennes et

décrivent ainsi, à de multiples reprises, les relations entre Juifs et chrétiens. En effet, nous ne manquerons pas d'évoquer le roman *L'ami Fritz* qui met en scène une amitié entre un bourgeois chrétien, Fritz Kobus, qui fuit le mariage – mais finit par tomber amoureux – et le rabbin David Sichel sans cesse sollicité pour marier des jeunes gens. Nous évoquerons aussi le récit *Histoire d'un paysan* dans lequel un paysan alsacien entreprend d'expliquer de quelles manières la Révolution a été un bienfait pour l'ensemble du monde rural. Afin de mieux en saisir le contexte socio-politique, l'ascension sociale des Juifs d'Alsace sera alors mise en parallèle avec celle des autres Alsaciens.

Or, pourquoi les Juifs d'Alsace ressentent-ils de l'animosité envers leurs confrères Juifs allemands, comme on le constate dans le premier tome du *Panier de houblon*, publié en 1994? En évoquant son histoire familiale sur plusieurs générations, de la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle au troisième Reich, Claude Vigée nous livre des clés de compréhension. Notre poète-écrivain raconte, parallèlement à son enfance, l'histoire de ses aïeuls – notamment celle de ses grands-parents qui est marquée par l'assimilation française. Il souligne alors un paradoxe: au moment où émerge une identité judéo-alsacienne singulière, le processus d'assimilation à la société française se met en place de manière irréversible. Or ce processus a pour conséquence d'éloigner l'individu de son identité plurielle judéo-alsacienne.

Dans un premier temps, cette communication analysera l'histoire des frontières fluctuantes de l'Alsace entrecroisée avec celle du judaïsme rhénan jadis ouvert et dynamique. Nous parlerons ensuite de l'émergence des identités alsacienne et judéo-alsacienne liées au besoin de s'affirmer face à autrui. Enfin, nous finirons en mettant en relief les revers d'une nouvelle identité marquée par l'assimilation et le manque de transmission culturelle et religieuse.

## *1 L'histoire des Juifs d'Alsace au sein de frontières fluctuantes*

### *1.1 L'Alsace: mosaïque et unité*

L'Alsace possède des frontières naturelles avec d'un côté la crête des Vosges, de l'autre le Rhin et enfin les premiers contreforts du Jura. Pourtant, suite à des circonstances parfois fortuites, les limites de l'Alsace "ont été singulièrement fluctuantes avant d'aboutir au tracé actuel (...)"



(Dollinger 5). Au Nord, aucune frontière naturelle ne sépare l'Alsace du Palatinat, c'est pourquoi, les changements y ont été les plus marquants (6). D'ailleurs, dans les romans d'Erckmann-Chatrian des scènes ont lieu dans des villages qui appartiennent désormais au Palatinat mais qui étaient alors françaises<sup>3</sup>: "il est bon de rappeler que sous la Révolution encore, les habitants de ces villages se sentaient aussi alsaciens que ceux du Wissembourg" (7). Les oscillations n'ont pas cessé: même le cours du Rhin a évolué et influencé la démarcation des frontières. C'est ainsi que des villages aujourd'hui badois étaient alsaciens, comme c'est le cas de Vieux-Brisach. On peut citer l'exemple de Sarre-Union qui est rattachée à l'Alsace par décret en 1793 (pour raison confessionnelle) bien qu'il s'agisse d'une partie de la Lorraine. De son côté, la Haute-Alsace<sup>4</sup> appartient pendant longtemps au diocèse de Bâle. Enfin, le traité de Francfort mettant fin à la guerre franco-allemande en 1871, enlève le territoire de Belfort à l'Alsace. En fait, celle-ci a connu deux siècles d'unité "du milieu du XVII<sup>e</sup> au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup>, avec le duché d'Alsace, au moment où apparaît le nom même d'Alsace; ensuite de 1648 (ou mieux de 1681) à 1790, avec la Province d'Alsace, création de Louis XIV"<sup>5</sup>. En effet, les traités de Westphalie, qui mettent fin à la guerre de Trente Ans en 1648, rattachent une grande partie de l'Alsace à la France tandis que Strasbourg n'est rattachée qu'en 1681 et que Mulhouse reste intégrée à la Confédération helvétique et ne sera rattachée à la France que sous la Révolution. Au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'Alsace constitue un carrefour commercial, un champ de bataille mais surtout une zone frontière entre les forces catholiques et protestantes (Livet 259). Claude Vigée le souligne bien: "Pris en étau entre les catholiques et les protestants de la province, nos pauvres aïeux juifs se tenaient cois pour éviter de recevoir des coups de trique des deux côtés à la fois" (408-409). Enfin, l'Alsace a été rattachée à l'Allemagne en 1871 et durant le troisième Reich mais est redevenue française en 1918 et 1945. Ainsi dans une même génération, on pouvait avoir été Allemand et Français.

Non seulement les frontières qui délimitent l'Alsace sont mouvantes mais ce territoire est marqué par des subdivisions nombreuses et fluctuantes. À la veille de la Révolution, outre les fiefs des membres de la noblesse issue de Basse-Alsace et ceux des grandes abbayes, les villes de la Décapole continuent d'être gouvernées suivant les constitutions établies au Moyen-Âge. C'est pourquoi Roland Oberlé résume la situation ainsi: "Au plan politique, l'Alsace est une mosaïque de principautés de fiefs, de villes libres qui s'enchevêtrent étroitement. Dans le nord de la province, se

trouvent les terres appartenant aux princes allemands (...)” (*La Révolution* 81). Selon lui, “l’entrée de Mulhouse dans le giron français constitue à la fois le point d’origine et le symbole de la transformation d’une mosaïque hétéroclite en un ensemble cohérent désormais tourné vers la France” (188). En effet, avec le traité de Bâle, signé en 1795, “toute la rive gauche du Rhin est devenue française” (189). Cependant, en 1789, le peuple ne s’exprime qu’en dialecte: il ne connaît pas la langue française alors qu’il comprend l’allemand. C’est dans ce contexte que s’inscrit l’émergence de l’entité judéo-alsacienne dans le sillage de l’identité alsacienne qui apparaît après la Révolution et se renforce après l’annexion de 1871 par l’Allemagne. En effet, le face à face avec, tour à tour, la France et l’Allemagne pousse les habitants d’Alsace à s’interroger sur leur identité et à la renforcer.

## *1.2 Du judaïsme “rhénan” au judaïsme alsacien*

Suivant le mouvement des légions romaines,<sup>6</sup> des Juifs venant de Rome remontent le Rhin et ses affluents<sup>7</sup>. Bien qu’en Terre d’Israël, le Temple de Jérusalem soit détruit en 70 par les Romains, sans parler de la dure répression qui a lieu après la révolte initiée par Bar Kochba entre 132 et 135, les Juifs de Gaule et d’Alsace, sous l’empire romain, vivent sereinement et accèdent même à la citoyenneté romaine, d’où cette remarque de Claude Vigée: “nos premières communautés le long du Rhin ne dataient-elles pas de l’époque romaine?” (92). A partir du V<sup>e</sup> siècle, le pouvoir est dans les mains de l’Église chrétienne qui se montre hostile envers les Juifs. A cette époque, l’Alsace ne fait pas partie du Royaume de France qui s’arrête aux frontières constituées par le Rhône, la Saône et la Meuse. C’est ainsi que, lorsqu’en 1306 un édit de Philippe le Bel expulse les Juifs, une partie d’entre eux viennent s’installer dans la vallée du Rhin. Le rattachement de l’Alsace à la France n’empêche pas, à partir du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, des Juifs d’outre-Rhin de venir accroître la population juive d’Alsace. Ceci n’a rien de surprenant car depuis environ l’an mille,<sup>8</sup> le judaïsme ashkénaze s’est développé dans l’espace rhénan et a pris naturellement le nom de “judaïsme rhénan”. Jacques Schwartz souligne que “le judaïsme alsacien a toujours été sur les bords du domaine germanique donc ashkénaze” (428). Alors que nous avons vu qu’avant la Révolution, l’Alsace est un “agrégat d’autorités diverses” (Becker 14), les Juifs d’Alsace “font partie d’une entité mal définie qui, par-delà les frontières géographiques et historiques

mouvantes, les unit aux Juifs du Palatinat, du pays de Bade et de Hesse” (66). Freddy Raphaël affirme d’ailleurs qu’à l’époque médiévale, cette aire, dont le judéo-allemand constitue l’élément d’unité, comprend la Suisse, la Moravie et le Nord de la Hongrie (66). Jusqu’à la Révolution, les Juifs d’Alsace participent à la dynamique économique, culturelle et religieuse qui englobe l’ensemble des communautés juives du Rhin. Or lorsque Claude Vigée nous présente la vision des Juifs alsaciens, notamment à travers ses grands-parents, il évoque leur haine envers les Juifs d’Allemagne:

comme d’habitude on déteste encore davantage ses voisins immédiats, plus menaçants que ceux qui demeurent quelque part au moins, les Juifs alsaciens d’alors portaient aux Juifs allemands une haine toute particulière. Ils ne pouvaient leur pardonner d’avoir joué les grands seigneurs chez nous, tout en les traitant par le mépris, durant le demi-siècle de la première annexion allemande, de 1870 à 1918 (38).

En l’espace d’un siècle, un fossé est apparu et s’est élargi entre des communautés qui jadis entretenaient pourtant d’étroites relations.

## *2 L’affirmation de l’identité alsacienne et judéo-alsacienne: vers un repli?*

### *2.1 L’émergence des identités alsacienne et judéo-alsacienne: s’affirmer*

#### *2.1.1 L’évolution de la perception des frontières en Alsace*

En France, les frontières étaient perçues comme des armatures militaires tournées vers l’adversaire (*Mappe monde* 34) tandis que les limites existantes étaient liées au droit du roi. Mais la conception de la frontière s’est transformée avec l’apparition de la souveraineté populaire à partir la Révolution. Cependant, comme le remarque Claude Braudel, la question des frontières reste complexe et elle a d’abord du mal à s’imposer (Wahl et Richez, *L’Alsace* 217). En effet, “entre 1850 et 1950, la frontière connut en Alsace, un tracé éminemment instable, tantôt fixé sur le Rhin, tantôt sur les Vosges” (217) sans parler du changement de frontière avec la Suisse et l’absence de frontière au Nord entre 1818 et 1930. En fait, la perception de la frontière évolue entre la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> et la seconde car les frontières commencent alors à s’imposer “avec l’exacerbation des mouvements nationaux” (217).

Alors que sous le second Empire, les frontières ne sont pas fermées, Claude Vigée évoque ensuite les voyages de sa famille qui traverse les Vosges dans un sens comme dans l'autre à cause de "la nouvelle frontière tracée après la déroute de Sedan et la signature du honteux traité de Francfort" (38). L'idée de frontière apparaît à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (Wahl et Richez, 236). L'Alsace se constitue alors comme une petite patrie: "elle devint une entité culturelle originale par rapport à la France et à l'Allemagne" (237). Selon les auteurs de *L'Alsace entre France et Allemagne 1850-1950*, deux causes entrent en jeu. D'abord le mouvement régionaliste se développe en Europe et gagne l'Alsace "en réaction contre l'industrialisation, la concentration et l'uniformisation". Ensuite, ce mouvement survient alors que les Alsaciens souhaitent "affirmer leur différence avec les Allemands" (237). En fait les événements entre 1870 et 1872, dont le rattachement à l'Allemagne, ont pour conséquence "un repli des Alsaciens sur eux-mêmes" (237). Or les Juifs d'Alsace suivent eux aussi ce mouvement.

### 2.1.2 *La fibre patriotique des Juifs d'Alsace*

La Révolution marque un tournant dans la vie des Juifs de l'Est: l'émancipation leur est accordée, faisant d'eux des citoyens comme les autres. Mais "si pour les Juifs du reste du royaume, les droits civiques seront accordés sans trop de réticences, il en va tout autrement pour les Juifs alsaciens" (Oberlé, 120). De plus, Raphaël Freddy souligne bien que la transformation du statut politique des Juifs en 1791 n'entraîne "pas une modification profonde de leur statut social" (Raphaël, *Cahiers* 30, 65). En effet, quand ces derniers obtiennent enfin les droits civiques, ceci ne permet cependant pas leur intégration dans la société alsacienne (139), même quand, comme à Strasbourg, la nouvelle bourgeoisie est parvenue au même niveau social que les autres. À cette époque, un changement a surtout lieu en raison de la fixation des frontières alsaciennes et notamment celle du Rhin qui sépare alors les Juifs d'Alsace du reste des communautés juives situées à gauche du Rhin. Néanmoins, depuis la Révolution, les Juifs d'Alsace, ont développé une fibre patriotique française – comme le reste des Juifs de France. Ils se sentent reconnaissant envers la France qui leur a permis d'obtenir des droits civiques et d'effectuer une ascension sociale. Le changement s'effectue lentement au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: une bonne partie des communautés juives connaît une amélioration sociale. Jusque-

là, les professions les plus répandues étaient celles de marchands de bêtes et colporteurs. Mais peu à peu, certains Juifs d'Alsace découvrent le travail paysan, bien que la majorité continue d'assumer des fonctions d'intermédiaire jusqu'au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. D'ailleurs, dans *L'ami Fritz*, le *rebbe*<sup>9</sup> David Sichel sert justement d'intermédiaire lors d'un acte de vente d'une paire de bœufs. Au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, dans certains endroits "le Juif devient l'ami et le conseiller attitré de la maison" (Raphaël, *Cahiers* 30, 72). En effet, le rabbin David Sichel joue cette fonction auprès du héros Fritz Kobus. Dans *Le blocus*, les auteurs présentent une famille bourgeoise juive qui se lie intimement d'amitié avec un sergent, pourtant réputé comme étant dur, et qu'elle doit héberger lors du blocus de Phalsbourg en 1814.

### 2.1.3 L'amélioration sociale à la campagne

Vigée souligne que son grand-père "fort conscient encore de la condition juive rurale en Diaspora Rhénane" appartenait à "une génération campagnarde assagie par l'expérience de ce lourd passé non-dit" (121). En effet, il fait référence au fait qu'en Alsace, jusqu'à la Révolution, les Juifs n'ont pas eu le droit de résider à l'intérieur des villes pendant "un demi-millénaire". C'est ainsi que beaucoup de Juifs résidaient dans les campagnes et partageaient le sort difficile des paysans. Mais la Révolution apporte un soulagement dans le monde rural. C'est ce qui met en scène le roman *Histoire d'un paysan* où le narrateur Michel Bastien est présenté comme un cultivateur au Valtin écrivant à ses amis:

Bien des gens ont raconté l'histoire de la grande révolution du peuple et des bourgeois contre les nobles, en 1789. C'étaient des savants, des hommes d'esprit, qui regardaient les choses d'en haut. Moi, je suis un vieux paysan et je parlerai seulement de nos affaires (150).

Le narrateur décrit la misère dans laquelle vivent les paysans, misère aggravée par des charges écrasantes: "On aurait cru que les seigneurs et les couvents avaient entrepris d'exterminer les malheureux paysans, et qu'ils cherchaient tous les moyens d'y parvenir" (154). Or Michel Bastien est reconnaissant que toutes ces choses sont "bien changées, grâce à Dieu! Les paysans ont pris leur bonne part des biens de la terre". Il ajoute "tout cela, je le dois à la Révolution! Avant 89, je n'aurais rien eu; j'aurais travaillé

toute ma vie, pour le seigneur et le couvent” (155). Derrière ce narrateur, les auteurs expriment leurs désaccords envers les gazettes où on lit, dans les années 1860, que: “la Révolution a tout perdu” (156). C’est pourquoi le narrateur affirme qu’il est résolu “d’écrire cette histoire pour détruire ce venin, et montrer aux gens ce que nous avons souffert” (156). Les paysans sortent donc de la misère et atteignent un niveau de vie convenable, voire un complet changement pour ceux qui s’enrichissent. Issue de ces milieux ruraux, la famille de Léopold, le grand-père de Vigée a connu, elle-aussi, une ascension sociale, certes plus lente, comme beaucoup de Juifs d’Alsace. Le grand-père maternel, qui s’est associé au commerce de céréales de son père sous les dernières années du règne de Napoléon III, ajoute à ses prouesses personnelles “la fierté que lui donnait l’ascension sociale encore récente de sa famille, sortie de ses murs pisés, villageois dans l’Outre-Forêt de la Basse-Alsace, il y avait à peine vingt-cinq années” (116).

Cependant, Freddy Raphaël souligne qu’“au fur et à mesure que les petites communautés juives plongeaient leurs racines dans les sols alsaciens et s’y agrippaient avec plus de ténacité, leur horizon se rétrécissait” (Raphaël, *Catholiques* 191). C’est ainsi que la délimitation de l’entité alsacienne lors de la Révolution a poussé les Juifs alsaciens, dans le sillage des autres Alsaciens, à prendre conscience de leur singularité. Mais peu à peu leur affirmation identitaire s’est transformée et ils se sont “ankylosés dans leur propre culture” (191) pour reprendre l’expression de Raphaël Freddy.

## *2.2 Les revers d’une nouvelle identité: écueil de l’assimilation et défaut de transmission*

Coupés du monde outre-Rhin et peu en contact avec ceux de France, les Juifs d’Alsace se sont donc progressivement repliés sur eux-mêmes<sup>10</sup>. Claude Vigée ne décrit-il pas ses grands-parents comme n’ayant jamais connu que les rues proches de leur domicile? On retrouve ce genre de témoignage chez Léon Cahun quand il décrit ce fait chez les Juifs de Hochfelden du XIX<sup>e</sup>. Claude Vigée, qui est né en 1921 à Bischwiller, décrit l’embourgeoisement de ses grands-parents maternels. Celui-ci s’accompagne d’une volonté d’assimilation au détriment de leurs racines juives. C’est ainsi qu’il décrit leur habitation qui se veut le plus français possible:

Les meubles de la salle à manger, en noyer massif et richement sculptés, imitaient en l'exagérant le style Louis XIII. La mode était fort répandue dans les foyers bourgeois de la Basse-Alsace après la chute du second Empire. Lui succéda vers 1900 le faux Henri II, plus affligeant encore dans sa banalité prétentieuse (55).

Coralie est présentée comme une vraie bourgeoise: "Comme toutes les dames de son rang, ma grand-mère Coralie prenait quotidiennement le thé à quatre heures. Mais on le servait à l'anglaise [...] dans un service de porcelaine fine [...] de pur style Napoléon III" (53). D'ailleurs son mari, Jules, meurt "après une longue maladie, victime de l'artériosclérose qui frappait rituellement les vieillards de la bonne bourgeoisie locale" (72). Parallèlement, Vigée décrit la déculturation des Juifs d'Alsace:

Les Juifs de la campagne rhénane étaient depuis toujours d'obédience orthodoxe. L'observance méticuleuse des préceptes religieux traditionnels compensait en partie, chez eux, l'ignorance profonde de l'enseignement talmudique et de la pensée théologique juive (83).

L'auteur en déduit que son ancêtre né en 1722 et mort en 1796 puis son quadrisaïeul, qui mourut en 1840, vivaient ainsi. À la faveur de l'émancipation, un de ses fils s'établit ensuite marchand de céréales à Haguenau. Dans la même continuité, ce trisaïeul et ses enfants "ne savaient pas grand-chose de la tradition religieuse mais vivaient encore pieusement dans l'observance tatillonne des rites" (84). Or dans le sillage du grand-père Léopold qui abandonne pourtant lui-même certaines traditions, Vigée exprime une critique envers sa grand-mère Coralie qui a fini par rejeter toutes leurs traditions en bloc. Comme c'est le cas pour elle et son mari, chez beaucoup de Juifs d'Alsace, "cette piété purement formelle ou sociale ne résista pas à l'assaut de la modernité et du laïcisme". C'est pourquoi, en une seule génération, les grands-parents sont "devenus de véritable incroyants" (84). Plus encore, avec son ami Lévy, Coralie bafoue *kippour*, le grand jeûne de la fête du pardon, en mangeant exprès du porc ce jour-là et en le faisant savoir (88). La grand-mère recherche à tout prix l'assimilation française même si elle n'en revêt que les apparences: "Bien que n'ayant rien lu, elle se targuait d'appartenir à l'engeance redoutable des libres penseurs voltairiens" (85). À travers ses descriptions familiales, l'auteur montre que le prix pour être intégré dans la société alsacienne est l'ignorance de sa propre histoire et de sa culture:

ils ne comprenaient plus grand-chose depuis la fin de l’Ancien Régime en France. La perte de l’identité, l’oubli du savoir, la fossilisation de la pratique religieuse devenue arbitraire et absurde avant son éclipse définitive, voilà le prix que les Juifs d’Alsace ont dû payer pour l’octroi du privilège de l’émancipation révolutionnaire (94).

Or l’œuvre de Vigée présente tous ces abandons comme ayant été inutiles puisqu’en fin de compte l’extermination nazie ne fait pas de différence entre ceux qui sont assimilés et ceux qui ont conservé les traditions. D’autre part, comme beaucoup d’enfants issus de parents assimilés à une nouvelle société, Vigée reproche à ses grands-parents de ne pas avoir maintenu une transmission. À cela il oppose le modèle de son grand-père Léopold qui se rattache à la tradition des Juifs vivant à la campagne depuis des décennies et qui transmet des coutumes, des savoirs et surtout le judéo-alsacien à son petit-fils. Vigée présente donc deux types de portraits, entre Coralie qui veut abolir les frontières la séparant de la bourgeoisie française (étant assimilée, elle y parvient) et Léopold qui veut maintenir une frontière identitaire. Comme l’explique Vigée, un conflit insoluble oppose les uns aux autres: entre Léopold, le grand-père maternel “encore attaché à une tradition devenue routinière, maintenue en vie provisoire dans la faible mesure où il la comprenait, et ma branche paternelle citadine, déjà sceptique, indifférente ou même hostile à la pratique religieuse abandonnée, qu’elle tournait en dérision” (89). Ainsi, dans un cas comme dans l’autre, le récit de Vigée confirme bien l’existence d’un repli sur soi-même des communautés juives. L’annexion de l’Alsace lors du troisième Reich marque le début d’une double tragédie, celles de communautés décimées et celle d’un amour pour la patrie française qui a été trahie.

### *Conclusion*

“L’unification” de l’Alsace à partir de la Révolution a marqué la naissance de l’entité judéo-alsacienne. En effet, à partir de là, les échanges culturels et religieux avec l’outre-Rhin ont commencé à s’amoinrir avant de s’arrêter complètement. Cependant c’est bien plus tard, lorsque qu’on assiste à la prise de conscience d’une petite patrie alsacienne, c’est-à-dire des frontières de l’Alsace, qu’on voit apparaître l’affirmation d’une identité singulière



qu'elle soit alsacienne ou judéo-alsacienne. La mutation sociale des Juifs alsaciens s'effectue à partir du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle comme c'est le cas du héros du *Blocus* d'Erckmann-Chatrian, qui appartient à cette nouvelle bourgeoisie. Dans ce milieu, elle s'accompagne d'un processus d'assimilation à la société française laïque qui crée au sein des familles juives des fractures – voire des frontières – entre ceux qui tiennent à conserver leur tradition, même partiellement – et ceux qui désirent tout abandonner pour devenir de “vrais français”. Or ceci aboutit à un repli sur soi qui ne fera que s'accroître jusqu'à la Seconde Guerre mondiale, comme l'a décrit Claude Vigée en s'appuyant sur l'expérience de toute sa famille.



- 1 Les six romans composant le recueil *Gens d'Alsace et de Lorraine* ont été publiés en feuillets de presse puis en volume entre 1863 et 1869. Erckmann-Chatrian, *Gens d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, Paris, Omnibus, 1993.
- 2 Nom de plume d'Émile Erckmann (1822-1899) et Alexandre Chatrian (1826-1890).
- 3 En 1815, le traité de Vienne ramène la France à ses limites avant 1792. Ce traité dessine alors les frontières de l'Europe.
- 4 La Haute-Alsace correspond à peu près à l'actuel Bas-Rhin et au territoire de Belfort.
- 5 Les traités de Westphalie ont été conclus en 1648 pour mettre fin à la guerre de trente ans.
- 6 Lire Bernadette Schnitzler, "Les Romains sur le Rhin".
- 7 En 74 avec le déplacement de la frontière entre le Danube et la Rhétie, l'Alsace devient une base arrière faisant partie du glacis de la rive gauche du Rhin: la limes, le mur de 568 km du Rhin Moyen à Miltenberg. Mais au 4<sup>e</sup> et 5<sup>e</sup> siècles après J. C., elle retrouve son rôle défensif.
- 8 Lire Jean Camille Bloch, "Dix siècles d'une présence continue".
- 9 "Rabbin" en judéo-alsacien.
- 10 Ils ont aussi beaucoup émigré aux États-Unis.



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# One whose “fate” was writ’ in water: Percy Bysshe Shelley and the water sublime, between poetry and cultural memory

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The Romantic period witnessed profound transformations in the material, economic, and social condition of the poets. With the newly-born middle-class providing the bulk of a larger reading public, the professionalization of literature significantly changed the poets’ attitude towards the reception of their work. Against the prospect of scathing reviews and commercial failure, the Romantics developed a culture of posterity that opposed *hic-et-nunc* popularity to posthumous fame (cf. Williams 33-52; Bennett 38-64). Thomas Chatterton, the young poet who had committed suicide at seventeen, was crowned the hero of a generation of writers who viewed future redemption as the reward for artistic genius. In his essays and lectures, William Hazlitt offers a clear picture of both the Romantic culture of posterity and the discourse that such culture produced. In “On Different Sorts of Fame” (1817), the critic outlines a plea for artistic endurance, equating posthumous fame with excellence in that “accident, the caprice of fashion, the prejudice of the moment, may give a fleeting reputation; – our only certain appeal, therefore, is to posterity; the voice of fame is alone the voice of truth” (*The Round Table* II: 53). Because aesthetic genius is ahead of contemporary taste, Hazlitt suggests, poetic fame is not to be attained in the present. Accordingly, in “On the Living Poets” (1818) he warns writers and readers alike of the ephemeral nature of present-day popularity and argues that “The temple of fame stands upon the grave: the flame that burns upon its altars is kindled from the ashes of great men. Fame itself is immortal, but it is not begot till the breath of genius is extinguished” (*Lectures* 283).

Interestingly, cultural memory was to confirm Hazlitt's predictions. Soon after John Keats's and Percy Bysshe Shelley's death, their graves in the Non-Catholic Cemetery of Rome became a symbol of the artistic deprivation they suffered in their lifetime – attacked, censored, or at best neglected – as well as a site of pilgrimage for future generations. Keats's belief in the posthumous reception of his work is a recurrent concern in his works and letters,<sup>1</sup> and when his health conditions grew worse, his testament and tomb became his chief preoccupation. In addition to the reveries on the resting place that awaited him in Rome,<sup>2</sup> Keats requested that the grave should bear no mention of his name, but only the epigraph "One whose *name* was writ in water," a line inspired by Beaumont and Fletcher's tragicomedy *Philaster, or Love Lies A-Bleeding* (c. 1610). This choice is not only based on aesthetic grounds, it also carves in stone Keats's anxiety about being erased from the memory that future generations would construct. Towards the end of the Jacobean play *Philaster*, the restored heir to throne of Sicily, exposes Dion's treachery, warning him that "Your memory shall be as foul behind you / As you are living, all your better deeds / Shall be in water writ, but this in Marble" (V. iii. 80-82). The juxtaposition of water and marble hints at a hiatus between spontaneous and institutionalized memory, which will be shaped in such a way as to unmask – and keep alive – the remembrance of Dion's misdeeds:

No Chronicle shall speak you, though your own,  
 But for the shame of men. No Monument  
 (Though high and big as Pelion) shall be able  
 To cover this base murder; make it rich  
 With Brass, with purest Gold, and shining Jasper,  
 Like the Pyramids, lay on Epitaphs,  
 Such as make great men gods; [...]  
 (Beaumont and Fletcher V. iii. 83-89).

The chronicles, the richly adorned monuments and the pyramids that *Philaster* refers to point to the contemporary notion of *lieux de mémoire*, that is, the archives that societies purposely establish so as to foster a memorial, collective consciousness against cultural oblivion (Nora 12). Only a few metres from Keats's grave, visitors of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome are reminded of the tragic fate that awaited Percy Bysshe Shelley in July 1822, when he drowned off the Gulf of La Spezia.

Below the poet's name and dates of birth and death, his friends engraved the motto "cor cordium" and the famous lines from Ariel's song in *The Tempest* (1610-11):

Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange  
(Shakespeare I. ii. 402-4).

Shelley's epigraph refers not only to his "death by water," it also highlights the role that water played in his poetry. Shelley's work offers several examples of his poetic, philosophical, and scientific interest in this element, which he often represented by exploiting the aesthetic conventions of the sublime. What seems to have undergone multiple and rich transformations, to paraphrase Shelley's funerary epigraphy, is the very relation between the poet and water in cultural memory. Institutional attempts at preserving the collective remembrance of Shelley have often insisted on his magnetic attraction to water, suggesting that this morbid fascination, rather than the stormy weather, were ultimately responsible for his death.

Moving from these claims, this article firstly examines the aesthetic and philosophical implications embedded in Shelley's poetic representations of water before investigating the ways in which the relation between the poet and water has crystallized in cultural memory. Particularly the mid nineteenth-century biographies written by Shelley's friends Thomas Medwin (1847), Thomas Jefferson Hogg (1858), and Edward Trelawny (1858) narrate the poet's 'water sublime' from end-to-start. In their attempt at finding incidents and poetical hints that might anticipate Shelley's fate, the biographical accounts produced by the Shelley Circle traced a paradigm that survives in the present. Accordingly, Medwin's, Hogg's, and Trelawny's biographies are viewed as as *lieux de mémoire* fulfilling their memorial function alongside institutional archives such as the poet's grave in Rome and the Shelley Memorial at University College Oxford. Among these sites of memory, a recent and interesting case is *The Rising Universe*, the kinetic memorial commissioned by the Horsham District Council to celebrate Shelley's bicentenary in 1996. Arguably, material culture has responded to Shelley's early biographies by creating textual and visual narrations that, at least in part, reinterpret Shelley's poetry and life beginning from his death.

*Shelley's 'water sublime'*

Shelley's magnetic fascination with water bloomed early in his childhood, nurtured by the pastoral setting of Field Place.<sup>3</sup> The Shelleys' estate near Horsham, in West Sussex, was crucial in laying the foundations of the poet's "astonishing talent for portraying nature" (Bieri 54). As a child, Shelley would spend his afternoons in the meadows and farms surrounding the family's residence, located beside a stream that formed a chain of small lakes before flowing into the river Arun. Northwest of the estate, the pond where the horses from the nearby stables used to drink was the place that attracted him the most.<sup>4</sup> At once anticipating and fuelling the biographical accounts that the Shelley Circle would produce, the poet possibly sketched out his afternoons at Field Place in the nursery-rhyme rhythm of a fragment he composed in 1822:

A schoolboy lay near a pond in a copse  
Blackberries just were out of bloom  
And the golden bloom of the sunny broom,  
The pine-cones they fell like thunder-drops  
When the lazy noon breathed so hard in its trance  
That it wakened the sleeping fir-tree tops.  
Under a branch all leafless and bare  
He was watching the motes in their mimic dance  
Toiling like worlds through the dewy air,  
And he closed his eyes at last to see  
The Network of darkness woven inside  
Till the fire-tailed stars of the night of his brain  
Like birds round a pond did flutter and glide –  
And then he would open them wide again  
(qtd. in Prichard Jones 143-44).

As a child, Shelley would contemplate water ceaselessly, as if he were attempting to penetrate the mysteries concealed in that "Network of darkness" inaccessible to sight. His attitude in contemplating nature lies at the basis of his subsequent ideas on poetry and imagination, grounded on the pantheistic belief in a deeper reality existing beyond the material immanence of things. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was to stress this aspect in the introduction to the *Posthumous Poems* she edited in 1823, offering the image of a poet whose "life was spent in the contemplation of nature,





Figure 1. The pond at Field Place, Horsham. Copyright Darby Lewes and Bob Stiklus 1999, 2000. Courtesy of the owner. <http://lycofs01.lycoming.edu/~lewes/shelleysites/englandframe.htm>

in arduous study, or in acts of kindness and affection. He was an elegant scholar and a profound metaphysician; without possessing much scientific knowledge, he was unrivalled in the justness and extent of his observations on natural objects” (Shelley M., “Preface” iv).

Developing from his childhood experience of nature, and subsequently maturing in his poetic reflection, Shelley’s fascination with water rests on a number of elements that should be taken into consideration to understand the aesthetic value and the philosophical and poetic meanings that water conveys in his work. In this regard, the poet’s contemplative attitude should be discussed within the broader context of the perception of large water surfaces, such as waters and seas, in Romantic culture. By placing specific emphasis on the role of the oceans in the formation of minerals and rocks, Neptunism had proposed a new and “coherent discourse” that fostered

novel ways of contemplating, as well experiencing, the sea (Corbin 163-4).<sup>5</sup> The cultural implications of this new perspective are various. Water, as Corbin argues, provided Romantic poets and travellers the experience of “merging with the elemental forces and fantasies of being swallowed up” (164).<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, Romantic tourism was characterized by a new demand for bathing and coastal journeys. On the other hand, the sea came to represent the ideal *locus* for the Romantic poets in their quest for self-knowledge. The contemplation of extended water surfaces offered a new set of images to be explored, often within the aesthetic coordinates of the sublime, as Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), to quote but one notable example, suggests. Shelley’s gaze, however, is directed not so much towards the surface of seas, rivers, or ponds, but to their constituting element, water.

A significant example of the philosophical implications inscribed in Shelley’s representation of water is “Mont Blanc,” the poem he composed in Chamonix in the summer of 1816. Through the multi-layered lexical cluster that opens the poem, Shelley portrays the movement and optical effects of water on the sublime landscape of the Swiss Alps. The dark and gloomy atmosphere designed by water, and the forms that its flow can take – from “feeble brooks” to “vast rivers” and “waterfalls” – suggest several categories described by Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), such as immeasurability, vastness, magnificence, and infinity:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark – now glittering – now reflecting gloom –  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters, – with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* I: 542; ll. 1-11)

Disentangled from its aesthetic value, Shelley’s quest for a communion with water indicates relevant epistemological implications. Portrayed

against the sublime landscape of the Alps, water becomes symbolical of the relationship between the universe and the individual mind. Embodied in the “feeble brook” (the sound of which is “but *half* its own”), the individual mind is opposed to the universal power that expresses its voice through the river Arve, offering an

[...] awful scene,  
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down  
From the ice gulfs that gird his secret throne,  
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame  
Of lightning through the tempest; [...]  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* I: 542-43; ll. 15-19).

Power, it should be observed, is a keyword in the aesthetics of the sublime. In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke dwells on this aspect at large, arguing that “I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power” (59). Moreover, he connects the response to sublime landscapes with the experience of vastness and the feeling of awe, both of which ostensibly overwhelm Shelley when observing Mont Blanc. The power that Shelley sees embodied in the Arve, however, should not be interpreted in mere aesthetic terms. His concern is chiefly directed to the non-material, transcendent nature of the river. Shelley’s representation of Mont Blanc and the Vale of Chamonix relies on the aesthetic conventions of the sublime, yet he exploits these conventions in order to explore the relation that connects the individual with the universal.<sup>7</sup> In the ravine that echoes the motion of the Arve the poet finds himself “in a trance sublime and strange,” which is what enables communication between the universal Power and its individual and material embodiments – namely, the gorge with which he establishes a dialogue:

Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around;  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* I: 544; ll. 34-40).

The idea of water as the embodiment of the individual mind, distinct yet interrelated to a universal Power, is further explored in “The Cloud” (1820). Here, Shelley’s pantheistic ideals combine with his interest in contemporary scientific studies, and the aesthetics of sublime mingles with the discourse of chemistry. Speaking in the first person, the cloud introduces itself as a mass of condensed water that perpetually changes its form but never dissolves:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,  
And the nursling of the sky;  
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;  
I change, but I cannot die –  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* III: 363-64; ll. 73- 76).

The cloud’s sublime self-portrait reveals at once Shelley’s habit of empiricist observation and his knowledge of the water cycle, a topic that had been the object of recent scientific debate. At both the Syon House Academy of Brentford and Eton, Shelley had been a student of Adam Walker’s, whose work had contributed to disseminating the principles of “experimental” philosophy – that is, the investigation of universal laws through empirical observation and study. In *A System of Familiar Philosophy: in Twelve Lectures* (1799), Walker had argued that “water rises through the air, flying on the wings of electricity” (II: 38), and suggested that rain was the result of a clash between differently charged atoms. Only a few years later, the Fellow of the Royal Society Luke Howard was to gain a reputation as one of the founders of modern meteorology with his *Essay on the Modification of the Clouds* (1802-3). Shelley’s “The Cloud” incorporates the new vocabulary introduced by the discourses of chemistry and meteorology, and the scientific classification of diverse phenomena such as showers, dew, and hail. In the poem, the cloud describes itself as vapour, a mass of condensed water that is able to change its form perpetually, “Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb” (Shelley P. B., *Poems* III: 364; l. 463).

Shelley’s empiricist gaze and scientific curiosity mingle with his philosophical beliefs in that natural phenomena such as water evaporation and cloud modifications imply the mutability of form. Accordingly, Shelley lingers on the water cycle to further explore the idea of the embodiment of the universal (water) into the individual (the cloud). In so doing, he resorts

to the same metaphor he had expounded in “Mutability” (1816), where he had claimed that “We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon” (Shelley P. B., *Poems* I: 457; l. 1). Shifting from philosophy to poetry, the water cycle symbolizes the connection that the poet must establish in order for the poetic process to occur. Shelley would further stress this aspect in his poetic manifesto; *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), where water significantly becomes a metaphor for poetic creation:

A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight. (Shelley P. B., *The Major Works* 693)

Romantic culture attributed to water a new wealth of signification. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the contemplation of the sea had become an ontological experience through which poets attempted “to discover – or better yet, perhaps, to rediscover – who they were” (Corbin 164). In Shelley’s case, this quest was at once individual and poetical. In its mutability – and hence in its liquid, solid, and gaseous form – water exerted an unquestionable fascination on the poet. The sinuous flowing of the Arve, the sublime magnificence of the alpine ice blocks, and the protean quality of the clouds all suggest reading in Shelley’s attraction to water the co-existence of aesthetic, epistemic, and poetic factors.

### *The creation of a narrative: Shelley’s water sublime and cultural memory*

In her “Note on the Poems of 1822,” Mary Shelley observed that her husband had “almost anticipated his own destiny; and when the mind figures his skiff wrapped from sight by the thunder-storm, as it was last seen upon the purple sea, and then, as the cloud of the tempest passed away, no sign remained of where it had been – who but will regard as a prophecy the last stanza of the ‘Adonais!’” (Shelley M., “Note” 325). By inscribing Percy’s end into a tragic, predestined pattern that begins with the death of the poet in *Adonais* (1821), Mary’s remarks already draft that posthumous fictionalization of Shelley’s end which biographical discourse would soon resume and amplify. Particularly the biographies by Thomas

Medwin, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, and Edward John Trelawny reveal an attempt at finding hints of Shelley's "death by water" throughout his life.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, these texts seem to suggest a possible connection between the poet's shipwreck and the mesmerising attraction for water he had shown in his life. However, these biographies seldom frame Shelley's fascination with water within the context of his work.

In their attempt at institutionalising the posthumous image of Shelley, the recollections provided by Medwin, Hogg, and Trelawny should be discussed as *lieux de mémoire*. Based on first-hand knowledge and other records, such as letters and conversations, these writings constitute a primary vehicle for examining Shelley's presence in cultural memory. Unlike physical sites of memory, however, these texts invite careful scrutiny due to the discursive nature of life-writing. Rather than granting "direct access to unmediated memory," as Saunders observes, what life-writing reveals "is, instead, memory cultures" (322-3). Without dwelling upon the reliability of these biographies, it is interesting to discuss which meanings their authors attributed to the poet's sublime fascination with water. Medwin, for instance, observes that the poet's favourite game as a child consisted of playing with paper boats in the small pond at Field Place. In so doing, Medwin's narrative validates the possible autobiographical references of the 1822 fragment "A schoolboy lay near a pond in a cove," and views the poem *Rosalind and Helen: A Modern Eclogue* (1819) through the same perspective. In particular, Medwin (II: 12-3) identifies Rosalind with the young Shelley in that they share the same childhood pastimes:

[...] He was a gentle boy  
And in all gentle sports took joy;  
Oft in a dry leaf for a boat,  
With a small feather for a sail,  
His fancy on that spring would float,  
If some invisible breeze might stir  
Its marble calm; [...].  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* II: 275; ll. 180-186)

It is difficult to discern the extent to which Medwin's argument, like all memories, is a textualized fabrication. Certainly, what his biography repeatedly stresses is Shelley's (at times disturbing) attraction to water. In this context, Medwin's remembrance of the delight that Shelley took in Robert Southey's work is especially relevant. In particular, his reference to

a passage from *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) is not coincidental. Rather, it suggests the poet's dangerous fascination with water, and introduces the sense of an impending fate:

And water shall see thee!  
And fear thee, and fly thee!  
The waves shall not touch thee  
As they pass by thee!  
\* \* \* \*  
And this curse shall be on thee,  
For ever and ever. (qtd. Medwin I: 61)

The biographical accounts bequeathed by Shelley's friends all testify to the magnetic force that water exerted on the poet throughout his life. At Eton he would shun team games because of his poor sports performances, yet he used to take great delight in rowing. And recollecting a regatta which Shelley saw in 1809, Medwin remarks that "A wherry was [Shelley's] *beau ideal* of happiness, and he never lost the fondness with which he regarded the Thames, no new acquaintance when he went to Eton, for at Brentford we had more than once played the truant, and rowed to Kew, and once to Richmond" (Medwin I: 52).

Hogg's friendship with Shelley began at University College, and his records similarly document the poet's self-imposed seclusion, his walks along the Thames, and his entrancement on contemplating the small pond at Shotover Hill, a few miles from Oxford. Hypnotized by the movement of the water surface when throwing stones into the pond, Shelley, Hogg recollects, "would linger [there] until dusk, gazing in silence on the water, repeating verses aloud, or earnestly discussing themes that had no connection with surrounding objects" (I: 82).

When Percy and Mary Shelley joined Lord Byron in Switzerland in 1816, the two poets would frequently sail across Lake Geneva. As their boatman Maurice observed, Shelley "was in the habit of lying down at the bottom of the vessel, and gazing at Heaven, where he would never enter" (Medwin I: 240). Interestingly, Trelawny's recollections of Shelley's Pisan days suggest a slightly more disturbing view. Sometime in the spring or summer of 1821, Trelawny, who was bathing in the Arno, decided to teach Shelley how to float on water. Unafraid of plunging into the river, Shelley passively surrendered as water slowly drew him to the bottom. The poet, Trelawny remarks,



Figure 2. The park and pond surrounding Shotover House, Oxfordshire. Copyright Matt Gilbert, 2016. CC BY 2.0 (Creative Commons). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shotover\\_Park#/media/File:Shotover\\_Park\\_and\\_pond.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shotover_Park#/media/File:Shotover_Park_and_pond.jpg)

doffed his jacket and trowsers [sic], kicked off his shoes and socks, and plunged in; and there he lay stretched out on the bottom like a conger eel, not making the least effort or struggle to save himself. He would have been drowned if I had not instantly fished him out. When he recovered his breath, he said: “I always find the bottom of the well, and they say Truth lies there. In another minute I should have found it, and you would have found an empty shell. It is an easy way of getting rid of the body” (58-9).

The conversation reported by Trelawny points to a central aspect of Shelley’s ‘water sublime.’ The poet’s attraction to water reveals the need for the individual to connect to universal forces, to get access to the “Truth” Shelley expected to find deep down the river. This claim is reminiscent of what the poet had explored in “Mont Blanc” as well as of the “The Network of darkness” he had referred to in his 1822 fragment. Trelawny, however, simply concludes that the poet must have lacked some basic



human instincts, commenting that “Self-preservation is, they say, the first law of nature, [but] with him it was the last” (58). This claim is indicative of the process of textual fabrication that recurs in the biographies of the Shelley’s Circle, which struggled to read in the poet’s ‘water sublime’ an anticipation of his ‘death by water.’ The role of water in Shelley’s poetry is only marginally considered, with the exception, perhaps, of “A Vision of the Sea,” one of the two macrotexts that seem to be lying silently underneath Medwin’s, Hogg’s, and Trelawny’s life-writings. Composed in 1819, the poem is deliberately unfinished. Its abrupt ending suggests a story aborted by the apocalyptic fate the poet depicts in *medias res*:

— ‘Tis the terror of tempest ... the rags of the sail  
Are flickering in ribbons within the fierce gale:  
From the stark night of vapours the dim rain is driven,  
And when Lightning is loosed like a deluge from Heaven  
She sees the black trunks of the Waterspouts spin  
And bend, as if Heaven was ruining in,  
Which they seemed to sustain with their terrible mass  
As if Ocean had sunk from beneath them [...]  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* III: 369-70; ll. 1-8).

Although Medwin, Hogg, and Trelawny contributed to establishing an institutional memory of Shelley, their work cannot be examined without bearing in mind the discursive quality of biography. Consequently, their accounts should not be evaluated on the ground of genuineness, but in the way they emplot<sup>9</sup> incidents from Shelley’s life into their narratives. Medwin, Hogg, and Trelawny all acknowledge that water played an important role in Shelley’s life. Nevertheless, they manipulate the relationship between storyline and plotline, as if they were writing hints of the poet’s fate backwards. And in the way they encapsulated facts and personal recollections into their life-writing, another macrotext might have provided a repository of images and descriptions in their narratives of Shelley’s water sublime.

Mary Shelley’s role as an editor was crucial in publishing Percy’s work after his death, and her comments and notes equally contributed to constructing the memory of her husband. Her note to Shelley’s 1822 poems, as we have seen, suggests the germs of that process of memorialization and fictionalization of the poet that would be resumed by Medwin, Hogg,

and Trelawny. Curiously, Mary's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818; 1831) might have supplied them with incidents and images they expanded in their descriptions of Shelley's attraction to water. Victor Frankenstein's self-secluded attitude, and his abandonment to water provide a powerful portrait of the poet. At the beginning of volume two, for example, the scientist records his despair after his younger brother William is murdered and Justine Moritz wrongly executed. Caught up in an emotional turmoil, Victor recollects this episode as follows:

Often, after the rest of the family had retired for the night, I took the boat, and passed many hours upon the water. Sometimes, with my sails set, I was carried by the wind; and sometimes, after rowing into the middle of the lake, I left the boat to pursue its own course, and gave way to my own miserable reflections. I was often tempted, when all was at peace around me, and I the only unquiet thing that wanders restless in a scene so beautiful and heavenly [...] to plunge into the silent lake, that the waters might close over me and my calamities forever (*Frankenstein* 94).<sup>10</sup>

The scarcity of extratextual evidence obviously suggests taking due caution in drawing direct parallelisms. Yet Frankenstein's cruise along the Rhine bears a curious resonance to the words of Shelley's Swiss *batelier* in Geneva, who would precisely stress the poet's habit of lying still on the vessel in order to gaze at the sky. When Victor reconstructs the details of his voyage, he remarks that "Even I, depressed in my mind, and my spirits continually agitated by gloomy feelings, even I was pleased. I lay at the bottom of the boat, and, as I gazed on the cloudless blue sky, I seemed to drink in a tranquillity to which I had long been a stranger" (*Frankenstein* 160). By the same token, the images that Trelawny uses in reporting Shelley's 'narrow escape' from the Arno appear in *Frankenstein* when Victor reaches the Orkneys:

Between two and three in the morning the moon rose; and I then, putting my basket aboard a little skiff, sailed out about four miles from the shore. The scene was perfectly solitary: a few boats were returning towards land, but I sailed away from them. [...] I resolved to prolong my stay on the water; and, fixing the rudder in a direct position, stretched myself at the bottom of the boat. Clouds hid the moon, every-thing was obscure, and I heard only the sound of the boat, as its keel cut through the waves; the murmur lulled me, and in a short time I slept soundly (175-76).

The biographies written by the Shelley Circle were published in the central years of the nineteenth century. Only a few decades later, the efforts of Victorian literati and artists such as William Michael Rossetti and William Morris would help to reassess Shelley's reputation and poetic value, also by editing new critical editions.<sup>11</sup> As new philological attention was devoted to Shelley's work, the question is whether, and to which extent, his 'water sublime' has been handed down through the centuries, percolating into the cultural archives of the present.

### *Shelley, water, and the archives of the present*

Shelley's presence in cultural memory began to consolidate after his surge of popularity in the late Victorian Age and his first centenary in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Edward Onslow Ford's Shelley Memorial was inaugurated at University College Oxford in 1893, and the acquisition of Keats's lodgings on the Spanish Steps in 1906 marks the beginning of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association in Rome. Contributions produced after the establishment of such institutional *lieux de mémoire* are especially relevant to investigate Shelley's presence in mainstream culture, which interestingly emphasizes the poet's 'water sublime' inaugurated by Medwin, Hogg, and Trelawny.

An interesting case in point is the British magazine *Look and Learn*. Launched in January 1962, the periodical had a strong educational mission based on empiricist principles that enhanced the role of visual perception. Over the span of twenty years, the weekly issues of *Look and Learn* aimed at instructing young readers in various disciplines such as history, literature, travel, and sciences by offering written as well as visual narrations. In the 1960s and 1970s, the magazine featured illustrations inspired by Shelley's poems as well as episodes from his life. In addition to an 1895 engraved portrait of Shelley based on Amelia Curran's famous 1819 painting, and a scene depicting his elopement with Harriet Westbrook in 1811, the magazine published colour lithographs inspired by "Ode to the West Wind" and "To a Skylark," both after Robert Anning Bell's illustrations for the 1907 edition of Francis Turner Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury*.

According to the online archive of *Look and Learn*, four of the illustrations included in the magazine specifically focus on Shelley and water. Vicente García de Parede's *Byron and Shelley on the Lake of Geneva*

first appeared in Arthur Mee and John Alexander Hammerton's series *The World's Great Books* (1910), and represents the two poets on a boat trip surrounded by the Alpine landscape. Francis S. Walker's *Bisham Abbey* was originally published in the collection of essays edited by Andrew Lang *Poets' Country* (1907). Walker interestingly represents Shelley on a small boat on the shore of the Thames in Bisham, where, as Mary Shelley records, the poet would lie when writing *The Revolt of Islam* (1818).<sup>12</sup> For these two illustrations, unfortunately, the online archive of *Look and Learn* does not provide any details on the articles and issues in which they featured.

The other two images are original illustrations produced for the magazine, Ken Petts's *They Will Live Forever: Shelley – the Poet Lost at Sea*, and Andrew Howat's *Shelley's Death*, both of which depict the shipwreck of Shelley's boat, the *Don Juan*. Published in *Look and Learn* on 6 February 1971, Petts's black and white gouache on paper memorializes the last moments in the poet's life. Shelley's face reveals his awareness of the impending fade as he holds to the mast, next to his friend Edward Ellerker Williams and their young boatman, Charles Vivian.

By mixing glaring strokes and sulphurous hues, instead, Howat's *Shelley's Death* offers an apocalyptic scenario. The stormy background, and the helpless figures on the boat still respond to the aesthetic coordinates of the sublime, and in a sense, Howat illustrates at once Shelley's fate and work. His painting also offers a visual representation of "A Vision of the Sea," with its vessel lost "In the skirts of the thundercloud [...]" (Shelley P. B., *Poems* III: 370; l. 13). Shelley's description of the "Dim mirrors of ruin" (Shelley P. B., *Poems* III: 370; l. 17) that engulf the boat juxtaposes glaring flames and sulphurous flakes that are central to Howat's picture:

While the surf, like a chaos of stars, like a rout  
Of death-flames, like whirlpools of fire-flowing iron  
With splendour and terror the black Ship environ,  
Or like sulphur-flakes hurled from a mine of pale fire  
In fountains spout o'er it.—In many a spire  
The pyramid-billows with white points of brine  
In the cope of the lightning inconstantly shine,  
As piercing the sky from the floor of the Sea ...  
(Shelley P. B., *Poems* III: 370-71; ll. 18-25).

Pitted against Howat's illustration, the verbal narration of Shelley's death emphasizes the sublime fascination with water that the poet's mid-nineteenth century biographies had insisted on. Published in *Look and Learn* on 22 May 1976, the article begins by relating Shelley's 'narrow escape' in 1816, when he and Byron were caught in a storm while sailing from Meillerie to Geneva. The tempest and "The awareness of danger," the article points out, "had not daunted the two poets," and Shelley was ready to meet his fate:

Without any warning, the heavens opened and rain came down in torrents, nearly swamping their small craft. And, unlike Byron, Shelley could not swim. "Take your coat off!" ordered Byron. Shelley did as he was bidden and then sat down and grasped a pair of iron rings. "Byron, I have no notion of being saved. You'll have enough to do to save yourself. Don't trouble about me" ("The romantic death of Percy Bysshe Shelley").

The source of this incident is most likely Medwin's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, which includes the same words paraphrased in the article from *Look and Learn*:

"Byron, in one of his letters, says, 'We were in the boat,—imagine five in such a boat. The sail was mismanaged—the boat filling fast. He (Shelley) can't swim.—I slipped off my coat, made him slip off his, and take hold of an oar, telling him I thought, being an expert swimmer, I could save him, if he would not struggle when he kept hold of me; unless we got smashed against the rocks, which were high, and sharp, with an 'arched roof on them at that minute. We were then about a hundred yards from shore, and the boat in great peril. He answered me with great coolness, that he had no notion of being saved, and that I should have enough to do to save myself'" (Medwin I: 253-54).

Interestingly, Medwin also reports that Shelley admitted he had been overcome by a mixture of feelings, among which the fear of death, despite his inability to swim, was not predominant. "My feelings would have been less painful, had I been alone, but I knew that my companion would have attempted to save me, and I was overcome with humiliation, when I thought that his life might have been risked to save mine" (Medwin I: 254). In adapting Medwin's account, the article in *Look and Learn* well exemplifies the dynamics of cultural memory. As an artefact produced by a "memory culture," the image of the poet is constructed by harmonising several

elements through a process that can either dilute or dilate the incidents recorded. The relevance of these events is necessarily attributed *post quem*, according to hierarchies that depend on the process of textualization operated by memory, and which may not respect the unity of storyline and plotline that one would expect.

This issue is even more complex in the case of physical sites of memory such as paintings, sculptures, and memorial. Although they may still be viewed and interpreted as texts, these cultural artefacts lack the support of the written word that complements the articles in *Look and Learn*. In the mid 1990s, the Horsham District Council commissioned the British sculptor Angela Conner the creation of a memorial to celebrate the bicentenary of Shelley's birth. Inaugurated in 1996, *The Rising Universe* was a large kinetic water monument formed by an impressive globe over and from which water would flow into the pool at its bottom. Cracked open, the central section of the globe exposed the surface underneath its crust, enhancing the visual effect created by water by reflecting the sun and city lights. Being an 'occasional sculpture,' the monument was arguably conceived as a site of memory, a cultural signifier that aimed to represent Shelley's distinguishing traits so as to crystallize them in cultural memory. Conner's words on the bronze plaque on the pool unveil the rationale that guided her work, which, she admits, was inspired by Shelley's poetry. "Water," the sculptor explains, "is Shelley's element. It flows and surges through his poetry. It draws him to itself, tragically, in the Mediterranean accident which ends his life. In water, the source of life in this planet, there is also death" ("Cosmic Cycle (The Rising Universe)"). *The Rising Universe*, in other words, was inspired by Shelley's poetry and the "Cosmic Cycle" that animated it. As Conner adds in the plaque, "Horsham's poet of liberty knew that there is a cycle to all things, linking atom and cosmos in one recurring pattern" ("Cosmic Cycle (The Rising Universe)").

In *The Rising Universe*, Shelley's pantheistic views and poetic testament coexisted with the memory of his tragic death. Nevertheless, the history of Conner's monument is quite controversial, and the installation was eventually removed in 2016.<sup>13</sup> The 1999 edition of *The Companion Guide to Kent and Sussex* listed it as one of the sites worth visiting in the area of Crawley and Horsham, praising it as "an unusually successful example of abstract public art" (Spence 309). The reception of the memorial in mass culture, however, disproves this view. The comments posted under a YouTube video ("Horsham Town Fountain") reproducing



Figure 3. Angela Conner, *The Rising Universe*. Copyright Peter Fox CC BY-SA 2.0. (Creative Commons) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shelley\\_memorial\\_fountain\\_-\\_geograph.org.uk\\_-\\_385858.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shelley_memorial_fountain_-_geograph.org.uk_-_385858.jpg)

the water effects of *The Rising Universe* betray the difficulty that the public faced in attributing a clear meaning to the monument. The definition of Conner's installation as "The weird fountain" – as well as the blunt but straightforward "...WTF?" – suggests that visitors failed to grasp its allusions to Shelley's life and work, and hence did not understand its memorial function. Interestingly, the comment on the monument being "An Awful thing but it's fascinating" hints precisely at the mixture of feelings that constructed Shelley's 'water sublime' in the biographies of the Shelley Circle.



Figure 4. The *Shelley Memorial* at University College Oxford. Copyright Andrew Shiva CC BY-SA 2.0. (Creative Commons) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UK-2014-Oxford-University\\_College\\_02\\_\(Shelley\\_Memorial\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UK-2014-Oxford-University_College_02_(Shelley_Memorial).jpg)

*The Rising Universe* captured a key element of Shelley's life, and stressed the important function that water played in his poetry. Yet the trajectories followed by official attempts at creating an institutional memory may be significantly different from the ways in which individual memory develops the same process. "Modern memory," as Nora observed in his theorization of the *lieux de mémoire*, "is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the trace" (13). As it seems, Conner's kinetic water monument



may have lacked that immediacy. The “visibility of the trace” postulated by Nora seems better preserved by other Shelleyan sites of memory, such as Edouard Paul Fournier’s *The Funeral of Shelley* (1889). Insofar as the scene narrated has proved to be a fabrication, the painting partakes in the process of fictionalization of the poet’s death inaugurated by the Shelley Circle. However, Fournier’s funeral scene maintains at once Shelley’s memory in the collective imagination and perpetuates the Romantic culture of posterity. As Casaliggi and Fermanis (200) aptly observe, the painting offers “a narrative bridge that simultaneously evokes past memories (the death of Shelley) and projects present and future anxieties (Shelley’s memorialisation and afterlife).”

Shelley and water are still perceived as a binomial. Institutional archives confirm the poet’s ‘water sublime,’ yet this attraction is – at least in part – enfranchised from the morbid aspects lying under Medwin’s, Hogg’s, and Trelawny’s biographies. This is especially the case with the Shelley Memorial at University College Oxford. The monument does offer an image of the poet washed ashore, but the neo-classical posture of Ford’s sculpture transforms Shelley’s corpse into an idealized, peacefully sleeping body.<sup>14</sup> The premature end of the young poet is fully memorialized. The tragic aspects of his death, however, are only slightly hinted at, and so is his scientific curiosity. The plaque on the external wall of the memorial informs visitors that the same premises used to host the experiments of Robert Boyle, who identified the law describing the relationship between pressure and volume in gases, and Robert Hooke, whose microscopic observations were fundamental to cellular biology. And through these various forms of collective remembrance, the lines from Ariel’s song engraved on the Shelley’s site of memory par excellence – his grave in Rome – acquire new significance: “Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange” (Shakespeare I. ii. 402-4).



- 1 For instance, Keats's verse epistle "To My Brother George" (1816) articulates the contrast between poetic fame in the present and posthumous reception in the poet's hope for the "richer far posterity's award" (*Complete Poems* 66; l. 68). Two years later, he famously expressed in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats (25 October 1818) his belief that the unfavourable reception of his work was "a mere matter of the moment – I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death" (*Letters* II: 394). The scarce success of *Endymion*, and the recurring sore throat that plagued Keats's health explain the poet's subsequent criticism of the English cultural establishment. On 9 June 1819, he wrote to Sarah Jeffrey that "One of the great reasons that the English have produced the finest writers in the world is, that the English world has so ill-treated them during their lives and foster'd them after their deaths" (*Letters* II: 115).
- 2 See for example the letter that Joseph Severn wrote to John Taylor on 6 March 1821. Severn quotes Keats's words at the thought of his approaching death: "I shall soon be laid in the quiet grave – thank God for the quiet grave – O! I can feel the cold earth upon me – the daisies growing over me" (*Letters* II: 378). Likewise, William Sharp recollects that during the last days of his life Keats had expressed his "pleasure at [Severn's] description of the locality of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, about the grass and the many flowers, particularly the innumerable violets, also about a flock of goats and sheep and a young shepherd – all these intensely interested him" (93).
- 3 For Field Place and other Shelleyan sites mentioned in this article, see Darby Lewes and Bob Stiklus's pioneering web project, "*Desperately Seeking Shelley*": *PBS Sites/Sights 1999 – 2000*. The author wishes to thank Darby Lewes for her kind generosity.
- 4 According to Prichard Jones, the pond that Shelley referred to in his 1822 fragment might be "the water-filled stone quarries called 'wasps' on the crest of the hill above the house" (144). More recently, Wroe has identified it with "the millpond outside Warnham" (109).
- 5 Now superseded, Neptunism was a late eighteenth-century theory concerned with the formation of minerals and rocks. Based on the studies of the German geologist Abraham Gottlob Werner, and opposed to Plutonism, Neptunism

- posited that rocks were the result of a process of sedimentation which, originating in water, was also responsible for the decrease in sea levels. See Leddra 82-6.
- 6 This aesthetic change, as Corbin argues (189-95; 234-7), also affected painting, mostly through imitations from Claud-Joseph Vernet seascapes and storm scenes.
  - 7 In this respect, “Mont Blanc” should be read by bearing in mind Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” The poem, which was also written in Chamonix in 1816, claims that “The awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen among us [...]” (Shelley P. B., *Poems* I: 528; ll. 1-2).
  - 8 Shelley’s cousin and childhood friend, Thomas Medwin, published his *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1847. The poet’s fellow student at University College, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, debuted as a life-writer with the articles on “Shelley at Oxford” that appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1832 and 1833, and were subsequently incorporated in his *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1858). In 1858, Edward John Trelawny published his Pisan memories as *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*.
  - 9 The verb “to emplot” is used here in the sense introduced by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). In White’s argument, “emplotment” refers to the way in which facts are arranged into a plot and thus given signification.
  - 10 Similarly, at the beginning of volume three Victor finds refuge from grief “in the most perfect solitude,” which entails entire “days on the lake alone in a little boat, watching the clouds, and listening to the rippling of the waves, silent and listless” (*Frankenstein* 155).
  - 11 William Michael Rossetti’s *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* was published in 1870, and his *Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley* appeared in 1886. William Morris’s Kelmscott Press published an ornate three-volume edition of Shelley’s works in 1895.
  - 12 As Mary Shelley observed, “During the year 1817 we were established at Marlow, in Buckinghamshire. Shelley’s choice of abode was fixed chiefly by this town being at no great distance from London, and its neighborhood to the Thames. The poem was written in his boat, as it floated under the beech groves of Bisham, or during wanderings in the neighboring country, which is distinguished for peculiar beauty” (Shelley M., “Note on *The Revolt of Islam*” 96)
  - 13 Criticism was especially directed against the use of water, which was suspended in 2006 due to temporary shortage, and the expensive maintenance required by the memorial. In 2016, Conner made an appeal to the public for a relocation of *The Rising Universe*, believing that its removal from West Street was the result of the commercial renovation of the area. See the

unsigned article “At least £85,000 spent on Horsham’s Shelley Fountain,” published in the *West Sussex Gazette* in 2014, and Harley Tamplin’s “Creator of Horsham’s Shelley Fountain: ‘Commerce has overcome art’,” which appeared in the *West Sussex County Times* in 2016.

- 14 For a history of *The Shelley Memorial* at University College, and the Shelleyan archives at the University of Oxford, see Hebron and Denlinger’s volume *Shelley’s Ghost. Reshaping the Image of a Literary Family* (2010).



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# *Mathilda* by Mary Shelley: An Intertextual Analysis

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This essay sets out to carry out an intertextual analysis of *Mathilda*, the second work of fiction by Mary Shelley, by focusing on the two literary endeavours that were completed immediately before and after it, namely *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and *Proserpine*, a mythological drama finished on May 3, 1820, as Mary Shelley recorded in her journal: “write – finish Pxxxxxxx [Proserpine]” (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 316). As will be shown, *Mathilda* can be regarded as a variation on the theme of monstrosity, further problematizing the distinction between human being and monster the writer had already explored in her debut narrative. As for its connection with *Proserpine*, I argue that *Mathilda* might be read as a dramatic monologue dealing with female resistance to patriarchal tyranny, just like Mary’s mythological drama, albeit in a different way. The circumstances of the novella’s composition, followed by a brief history of its critical reception, will provide the necessary information to contextualize *Mathilda* and support its intertextual analysis.

## *1. How the Novella Was Created*

The first draft of *Mathilda*,<sup>1</sup> a novella originally entitled *The Fields of Fancy*, was completed in a short time span, between August 4 and September 12, 1819 (Clemit 153), when the Shelleys were residing in Villa

Valsovano, near Leghorn. Pregnant with her fourth child, Mary Shelley was still grieving the recent loss of her daughter Clara Everina (who died on September 24, 1818), and of her son William, who passed away in Rome, on June 7, 1819. Emotionally withdrawn from her husband (whom she held partly responsible for her children's fate), severely reproached by her father (who, besides being utterly insensitive to her pain, even accused her of lowering herself to the level of "the commonality & mob of [her] sex"<sup>2</sup> [Marshall 255]), she found some solace in writing.

As she recorded in her journal on October 27, 1822 (a few months after Percy's drowning), "when I wrote *Matilda*, miserable as I was, the inspiration was sufficient to quell my wretchedness temporarily" (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 442). After making some substantial changes, in February 1820, she entrusted her life-long friend Maria Gisborne (on her way to London) with the manuscript, now entitled *Mathilda*, asking her to deliver it to Godwin. For his own benefit, Mary wished her father to find an appropriate venue for its publication: since he had just lost a lawsuit concerning his Skinner Street house, he could use all the profits to pay off his debts (Faubert, *A Family Affair* 118). Quite surprisingly, according to Maria Gisborne, who wrote a long letter to Mary on August 8, 1820, Godwin found the plot of *Mathilda*, centered on a father's incestuous passion for his daughter, "disgusting and detestable" (Jones, *Maria Gisborne* 44), adding that, if ever published, a preface would be necessary, "to prepare the minds of the readers, and to prevent them from being tormented by the apprehension from moment to moment of the fall of her heroine" (Jones, *Maria Gisborne* 44).

As Jeanne Todd has elucidated, over several years, Mary repeatedly entreated her father to return the manuscript to her but to no avail<sup>3</sup> (xvii). As E.B. Murray pointed out, her request of April 1822 that Maria Gisborne retrieve *Mathilda* and have it copied is a strong indication that there was only ever one fair copy (Murray, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts* IV: Part 1, xxxiii; Shelley, *Letters* 1: 164). The scholarly consensus is that this unique copy remained in Godwin's hands until it was finally released in 1959, after 140 years of silence, a view seemingly reiterated by Michelle Faubert in her "Introduction" to the recent Broadview edition of *Mathilda* (2017). Yet, a brief entry in Mary's journal on September 4, 1821 – "read *Matilda* to Jane [Williams]" (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 379) – complicates the issue. In Graham Allen's view, Mary must have "retained some kind of copy of *Matilda*" (*Mary Shelley* 44). Nora Crook, concurring, suggests

that this was *The Fields of Fancy*, the draft version of *Mathilda*, which she could have adapted as she read, so that it approximated to the finished work (personal communication, December 9, 2018). Allen also proposed that Mary had eventually agreed with her father that *Mathilda* was “an unwise publication” (*Mary Shelley* 45) since, as Betty Bennett argued, it might have revived rumours about the scandalous, almost incestuous liaison between Percy Shelley, Mary and her step-sister Claire Clairmont (Bennett, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* 51).

## 2. *Mathilda: Beyond Mary Shelley’s Biography*

The theme of incest was rather common in nineteenth-century literature: *Manfred* by Lord Byron (1817), *The Cenci* (1819) by P.B. Shelley – a tragedy Godwin himself had highly praised (Bunnell 277) –, *Laon and Cythna* (1817) by P.B. Shelley, *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole, *Mirra* (1784–86) by Vittorio Alfieri, and *Ernestus Berchtold; or, the Modern Oedipus: A Tale* (1819) by John Polidori are some fair examples. Since its late publication, therefore, scholars have speculated on the actual reasons that prompted the philosopher to censor Mary’s novella. In Michelle Faubert’s opinion, for instance, he was probably afraid that “readers would interpret it autobiographically, casting him as the incestuously desiring father” (*A Family Affair* 102) of a not-so-fictional daughter whose mother had died of childbirth complications, a disturbing coincidence, blurring the boundary between fiction and real life. Rosaria Margareta Champagne has interpreted the author’s writing of *Mathilda* as a self-liberating process, providing a therapeutic outlet for trauma: “as I suspect, Mary Shelley writes her way into remembering a childhood punctuated by incest” (112); accordingly, sending the manuscript to Godwin may be viewed as a daring act of defiance. Quite the opposite, as Terence Harpold maintains, “the submission of the novel to Godwin signals Mary’s effort to engage him in the seduction fantasy” (64) staged in the novella; after all, as the writer confessed to Maria Gisborne in a letter dated October 30, 1834, she felt an “excessive and romantic attachment to [her] Father” (Jones, *The Letters* 2: 88). Since its first publication, for over three decades, the dominant approaches to the novella have mainly been biographical, psycho-biographical, or psychoanalytical,<sup>4</sup> almost identically replicating the words

of Elizabeth Nitchie (the first editor of *Mathilda*), in whose opinion “the biographical elements [were] clear: Mathilda [was] certainly Mary herself; Mathilda’s father [was] Godwin, Woodville [Mathilda’s friend] [was] an idealized Shelley” (xii). “In this story,” as Nitchie further observed, “as in all Mary Shelley’s writing, there is much that is autobiographical: it would be hard to find a more self-revealing work.” (vii).

As a result, the intrinsic artistic value of the text and its complexity were entirely overlooked, hidden behind what Graham Allen has termed “biographism,” i.e. the “literalizing equation between text and life” (*Reanimation* 21), employed “as a way of diminishing [Mary Shelley’s] importance as a writer and foregrounding her relation to canonical male writers”<sup>5</sup> (*Beyond Biographism* 170). Hence, in 1993, the novella was sarcastically dismissed by Jane Blumberg as “devoid of the professionalism which characterizes Shelley’s important novels;” as the academic remarked, *Mathilda* “is undisciplined and uncomfortably personal; [...it] is an uncontrolled, certainly therapeutic purge of psychological tensions and anxieties surrounding Shelley’s relationship with her father.” (225n). According to Blumberg, Shelley herself, “at Godwin’s suggestion, decided not to publish the book;” in the critic’s view, “the publication was not a serious original consideration.” (225n).

Twenty-five years have elapsed since that disparaging comment; during that time, scholarly efforts have been devoted to reassessing the text in its broader context, thus taking into consideration its connection with the female gothic novel,<sup>6</sup> with contemporary artistic expressions,<sup>7</sup> as well as with the existing debate on the social acceptability of suicide.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, its countless intertextual relations with Godwin’s narratives, Wollstonecraft’s treatises and stories,<sup>9</sup> P.B. Shelley’s plays, and even with Mary Shelley’s own later output (for instance, with *Valperga*, *Lodore*, and *Falkner*) have been the object of a thorough investigation.<sup>10</sup> What follows is my contribution to a still ongoing debate.

### 3. *Mathilda and Frankenstein*

The story is shaped as a confessional autobiography written by a dying twenty-year-old, Mathilda, for her friend Woodville. She begins with the death in childbirth of her mother Diana, whom her father had adored, and her father’s abandonment of his infant daughter to the care of an

unsympathetic aunt, followed by his return sixteen years later in order to “claim” her (Shelley, *Mathilda* 47). After a few months of bliss, Mathilda’s father, realizing that he has incestuous desires for his daughter, becomes melancholy and distant. Determined to ease his burden, Mathilda makes him reveal the source of his distress. Horrified, she decides to leave the following day. Waking from a nightmare in which her father has drowned himself, she finds his ominous farewell letter. She immediately begins a desperate pursuit and finds his corpse in a seaside village. Now unable to live in society, she stages her own fake death and moves to a remote cottage in the north of England. Following two years of isolation, she befriends a young poet, Woodville, who shares her grief since he lost his betrothed, Elinor, just before their wedding day. Despite their intimacy, Mathilda persists in concealing the cause of her dejection, but suggests that they both should commit suicide. Woodville talks her out of her folly, but when he departs in order to care for his ailing mother, Mathilda spends the night outdoors lost on the heath and develops a fatal consumption. Having now disclosed the dark secrets of her life, she knows that her friend will understand the reasons for her misery.

Both *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda* can be ascribed to the genre of fictional autobiography written in the epistolary form: Walton’s letters create the frame narrative of *Frankenstein*; Mathilda’s story is an epistolary autobiography. Both texts tackle the themes of human obsession, of boundary violations, of excess and madness that spread like viruses, either infecting other characters or affecting their lives. Both are endowed with an open ending, foreshadowing the death of the main protagonist: the Creature on his funeral pyre and Mathilda as a victim of consumption. Incest is hinted at in *Frankenstein*: Victor and his future bride Elizabeth are raised as siblings (she is described as Victor’s “more than sister” [Shelley, *Frankenstein* 35]), and, in the 1818 version of the novel, they are even linked by blood ties. Furthermore, in the scientist’s dream following the animation of the Creature, Elizabeth’s beautiful form locked in his fond embrace turns into his mother’s cadaver: “[Elizabeth’s] features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 58). Similarly, Mathilda could be viewed as the female counterpart of the Creature (the companion Victor Frankenstein refused to create), as the mirror of her creator’s “monstrous passion” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 73). Like him, she is abandoned at birth and neglected by her father in her formative years; she also suffers from a solitude – “my

grief was terrible: I had no friend” (49) – that, later on in the narrative, she actively yearns for, as the only suitable condition for her hideous self (Mathilda is somehow depicted as her father’s “hideous progeny,”<sup>11</sup> as his “polluted creature” [Shelley, *Mathilda* 107], quoting her own words). Like the Creature, who relies on Goethe’s *Werther*, on Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, and on Milton’s *Paradise Lost* for his education, she replaces teachers and instructors with the volumes in her aunt’s library which, as she observes, also “suppl[y] the place of human intercourse” (50). Both works feature an oak tree ominously struck and destroyed by a thunder-bolt,<sup>12</sup> and a scene of confrontation, where the creature faces his/her creator and demands his attention: “Listen to my tale” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 101), asks the Monster in *Frankenstein*, when he first meets Victor after being deserted; “listen to me” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 65), begs Mathilda, in her unyielding attempt to elicit her father’s secret. Moreover both the Creature and Mathilda compare themselves to a guiltless Adam, expelled from Paradise without committing any sin: in the Monster’s words, “I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 100); in Mathilda’s plea, “I lament now, I must ever lament, those few short months of Paradisiacal bliss; I disobeyed no command, I ate no apple, and yet I was ruthlessly driven from it. Alas! My companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 55).

In *Mathilda*, however, Mary Shelley makes the theme of the *double monstrosity* (creator/creature) even more explicit than in *Frankenstein*. Indeed, in his farewell letter, the maiden’s father (who remains strikingly nameless, like the scientist’s Creature, for the whole novella) portrays himself as a “Monster,” “as the fallen archangel,” whose blood “riots through his veins” (68). Consequently, when he finally flees, tormented by suicidal thoughts, his daughter “pursue[s]” (72) him (first in her prophetic dream, and then in reality), a verb that, far from suggesting amorous apprehension, seemingly implies the same aggressive feelings and vengeful intentions harbored by Victor Frankenstein when he chases the Creature into the northern realms of ice. As Katherine Hill-Miller has noticed, when, in Mathilda’s nightmare, father and daughter reach the brink of the cliff and she stretches out for him, touching his garments, the reader is uncertain whether she actually wishes “to pull him back from the edge or to push him over” (120).

#### 4. Mathilda and Proserpine

Even though, as mentioned before, Mary had grown emotionally estranged from her spouse, in the Summer of 1819 she collaborated intensely with him on various artistic projects, mainly concerning the theatre. According to Pamela Clemit, in fact, *The Fields of Fancy* “shows a return to the shared projects” (153) for the Shelleys. Percy was firmly convinced that his wife was gifted with a talent for dramatic writing. As Mary relates in her “Note on *The Cenci*, by Mrs Shelley,” he insisted that she tried her hand at tragedy: “he often incited me to attempt the writing a tragedy: he conceived that I possessed some dramatic talent, and he was always most earnest and energetic in his exhortations that I should cultivate any talent I possessed, to the utmost” (Shelley, *Note* 362-63). In Percy’s opinion, the perfect subject for her would have been the story of Beatrice Cenci, the victim of her father’s lust who had turned into a callous liar and a parricide as an extreme form of defense. When she declined his suggestion, Percy himself began to write *The Cenci*, in May 1819, while the couple was still in Rome. Interestingly enough, as Mary recalled in her “Note” on the text, that tragedy was “the only one of his works that he communicated to [her] during its progress. [They] talked over the arrangements of the scenes together” (Shelley, *Note* 362). Furthermore, to help him with the historical details, she even translated for him an ancient Italian manuscript relating the gruesome story of the Cenci family: *Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci*.

Percy completed *The Cenci* while he was composing *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama also dealing with the topic of resistance to despotism. In the poet’s creative imagination, the two theatrical pieces had to be viewed as parallel and complementary, offering the audience the possibility to choose between two alternative ways of defeating a tyrant: either by adopting the same strategies, thus transforming oneself into his mirror-image (as it happens in *The Cenci*), or by opting for endurance, compassion, and forbearance, as in the case of Prometheus, who refuses to use the same weapons of cunning and retaliation that cause Beatrice Cenci’s self-inflicted ruin. Given the profound intellectual intimacy shared by the Shelleys in the second half of 1819, I argue that *Mathilda* and *Proserpine* (both centered on an asymmetric relation between a man and a woman) may be actually considered as Mary Shelley’s counterpart

of *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*: the former (a highly theatrical text, as will be shown) explores what P.B. Shelley termed the “sad reality” (P.B. Shelley, *The Cenci* 298), the latter, the ideal.

The close connection between the two texts penned by Mary is also embedded in the very name Mathilda selected for the heroine: Matelda is a Dantean character mentioned several times in the novella,<sup>13</sup> an icon of beauty and innocence remarkably associated, in the lines of the *Divine Comedy* devoted to her, to Proserpine before her abduction by Pluto:

“Deh, bella donna, che a’ raggi d’amore  
ti scaldi, s’i’ vo’ credere a’ sembianti  
che soglion esser testimon del core,  
vegnati in voglia di trarreti avanti,”  
diss’io a lei, “verso questa rivera,  
tanto ch’io possa intender che tu canti.  
Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era  
Proserpina nel tempo che perdette  
la madre lei, ed ella primavera.” (*Purg*, XXVIII, 43-51).

Besides, in the text itself, Mathilda also compares herself to Proserpine, “who was gaily and heedlessly gathering flowers on the sweet plain of Enna, when the King of Hell snatched her away to the abodes of death and misery” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 58).

*Proserpine* is virtually an all-woman play focused on a closely-knit, mutually protective, semi-utopian community of goddesses and nymphs, who cultivate the art of storytelling, a generative power divorced from the sheer biological ability to procreate. Together, they forcefully refuse to be simply worshipped or victimized by patriarchal powers: quite the opposite, they are dynamically engaged in working their way out of tragedy. Hence, when Proserpine is seized by Pluto (who is perpetually absent from the stage, almost reduced to a mere name<sup>14</sup>) and taken to the underworld, they initially exhibit a belligerent stance, by openly defying the decrees of Jove. Then, influenced by Proserpine herself, who wisely refuses to oppose violence with violence (like P.B. Shelley’s Prometheus), they manage to obtain a subtler victory over their oppressor, without being polluted by the adoption of his base means; they will never be apart: for six months Ceres and her daughter will dwell together on earth; for the remaining time, they will be companions in their dreams.



The lively and effective imaginative faculty common to all female protagonists in *Proserpine*, their willpower and outstanding eloquence, turn into pale shadows of themselves in *Mathilda*. First of all, only on her deathbed does she allow herself to break the silence that has swallowed the sound of her voice since childhood. Secondly, she chooses to do it by writing a letter (a stereotypically female occupation), addressed to somebody who may never even receive it. Lastly, just like her scattered identity (characterized by omissions, secrets, and shreds of truth), her story looks fragmented, fraught with erudite quotations from the numerous books that she has obviously diligently read, but not assimilated. In the words of Christa Schönefelder, “Mathilda identifies with a large number of characters, both male and female, from literature, myth, and the Bible [...] Mathilda performs a considerable range of identities and subjectivities” (183-84). More than thirty authors are featured in Mary Shelley’s slender narrative: Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Socrates, Rousseau, Boccaccio, Walpole, Livy, Pope, Spenser are among the artists that she quotes.

Borrowing Mary Wollstonecraft’s words, like most women of her times, Mathilda has been kept “in a state of perpetual childhood”<sup>15</sup> (Wollstonecraft 76) in order to deprive her of agency: she has learned docility and restraint – since “exemplary stillness” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 49) is considered a female virtue –, and her words have been replaced with the sweet music of her harp, Mathilda’s “only friend:” “I often addressed it as my only friend; I could pour forth to it my hopes and loves, and I fancied that its sweet accents answered me” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 51). When she first meets her father, she is meaningfully “dressed in white” and looks “more like a spirit than a human maid” (53). In his farewell letter to her, her father compares her to Dante’s Beatrice, to “a nymph of the woods” (75), to “a deity of a lovely region, the ministering Angel of a Paradise to which of all human kind [she] admitted only him” (75). In Anne K. Mellor’s opinion, in a society that fosters the separation of roles, duties, and prerogatives according to gender, “the father-daughter relationship becomes a paradigm for all male-female relationships. Women are urged to remain daughters (or children) and marry ‘father figures’” (198). Undeniably, Mathilda’s mother, Diana (the name of the virgin goddess of childbirth), is also infantilized and depicted as “angelically gentle” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 21, 44): “there were few who could boast so pure a heart, and so much real humbleness of soul” (45). Following Anne K. Mellor’s line of reasoning, therefore, if spouses are regarded as child-brides, then there is no real distinction between wives

and daughters: they are nearly interchangeable. In giving birth to Mathilda, therefore, Diana almost generates “an erotic replacement of herself to service the desires of her father,” in the words of Ranita Chatterjee (141); in truth, this is exactly how he alarmingly perceives her, as evident in his revealing comment included in his letter to Mathilda: “Diana died to give her birth; her mother’s spirit was transferred onto her frame, and she ought to be as Diana to me” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 76).

The incest described by Mary Shelley is a psychological violation that is met with no real opposition since, unlike Proserpine, Mathilda is not surrounded by a community of supportive women<sup>16</sup> nor can she devise a strategy to challenge the power of her tormentor. As she confesses in the very last pages of the novella, she cannot cope simply because she has developed no instruments of her own: “almost from infancy [...t]he earth was to me a magic lantern and I [*sic*] gazer, and a listener but no actor.” (113). Incapable of selecting the part she wishes to play in the “drama of [her] life” (113), she performs the customary role assigned to daughters by the patriarchal culture she belongs to. Like Beatrice in *The Cenci*, therefore, she surrenders to a “dreary reality” (101) (the equivalent of P.B. Shelley’s abovementioned “sad reality”), thus passively mirroring and replicating the modes and behaviors of her oppressor.

Charles Robinson, among others,<sup>17</sup> has noticed that Mathilda “histrionically act[s] out her disgust for her father” (79), while displaying a decidedly ambiguous attitude towards him; in another essay, the scholar (together with Betty Bennett) had already described her as a “complicated persona who [...] struggles as a self-conscious tragic actress in a drama about the taboo subject of incest”<sup>18</sup> (Bennett and Robinson vii). As a matter of fact, Mathilda’s very name is infused with puzzling connotations: as well as evoking a Dantean figure (as already underlined), it is also reminiscent of Matthew Gregory Lewis’s handmaid of the devil, Matilda, who, disguised as a novice, corrupts and seduces Ambrosio, a seemingly irreprehensible monk. According to Ben Robertson, Matilda is a “compelling model of transgressive feminine sexuality linked with irrational behaviour” (187).<sup>19</sup> Hence, when Mathilda decides to flee society, she transforms into a ruthless mistress of deceit, who feigns her own death and, “with [her] dove’s look and a fox’s heart” (Shelley, *Mathilda* 85), wears her “nun like dress” (87) (elsewhere curiously described as “whimsical” [96]) as if it was a stage costume aimed at disguising her flawed and less-than-holy identity. Indeed, even the language she uses is

highly perplexing, overflowing with protestations of endless love for her father, portrayed as “the idol of [her] imagination” (51). At times, she even utters the very same sentences that sound disturbing when spoken by her incestuous parent: for instance, both view the other as “the life of [his/her] life” (85, 90); moreover, when he confesses his love for her – “you are my light, my only one, my life. – My daughter, I love you” (68) – he simply fulfills Mathilda’s innermost aspirations when, in youth, she envisaged her first meeting with her lost father, ardently hoping he would pronounce the following words: “My daughter, I love thee” (51-2). Finally, Mathilda’s afterlife is also pictured in far too earthly terms, as a place where her “dearest father” will be “restored” (109) to her, morbidly lost in the contemplation of her shroud as if it was “her bridal attire” (112): “in truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrap [*sic*] in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part” (112-13). Unlike Proserpine, who ingeniously undermines the power of darkness, who succeeds in resisting the tyrant and surfacing to light with the strength of her imagination, Mathilda is perpetually trapped in an underworld that she herself chooses over life.

To conclude, as this essay tried to demonstrate, even though it is certainly marked by Mary Shelley’s life experiences, *Mathilda* is much more complex and thought-provoking than a mere autobiographical work. An intertextual analysis and a close reading of the novella along with the two works the author composed immediately before and after reveal, first of all, that *Mathilda*, like *Frankenstein*, can be read as a further reflection on the subject of monstrosity, this time in the purely psychological and spiritual meaning of the term. Furthermore, given the deep collaboration between Mary and Percy in 1819-20 (a collaboration primarily centered on theatrical projects), I have highlighted the striking resemblance between Percy’s *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* and Mary’s *Mathilda* and *Proserpine*. In fact, in both cases, the two feasible (and clashing) reactions to despotism are presented: while Beatrice and Mathilda end up mimicking their tormentors, Prometheus and Proserpine are not willing to compromise themselves; they remain true to their own values and eventually thrive. Silenced for 140 years, the novella has thus recovered one of its numerous voices beyond a mere biographical interpretation, and continues to speak to the present, as well as to future generations of readers.



- 1 As Lucy Morrison and Staci Stone have noticed, even though “elsewhere Shelley consistently used the spelling *Matilda*” (275), in Mary Shelley’s fair copy the novella was entitled *Mathilda*.
- 2 Godwin’s letter was dated September 9, 1819: “I cannot but consider it as lowering your character in a memorable degree, and putting you quite among the commonality and mob of your sex, when I had thought I saw in you symptoms entitling you to be ranked among those noble spirits that do honour to our nature. What a falling off is here! How bitterly is so inglorious a change to be deplored! What is it you want that you have not? You have the husband of your choice, to whom you seem to be unalterably attached, a man of high intellectual attainments, whatever I, and some other persons, may think of his morality, and the defects under this last head, if they be not (as you seem to think) imaginary, at least do not operate as towards you. You have all the goods of fortune, all the means of being useful to others, and shining in your proper sphere. But you have lost a child: and all the rest of the world, all that is beautiful, and all that has a claim upon your kindness, is nothing, because a child of two years old is dead” (Marshall 255). William was actually three when he died.
- 3 On June 2, 1822, she wrote to Maria Gisborne: “Did you get *Matilda* from Papa?” (Jones, *The Letters* 1: 172).
- 4 The following are some of the numerous examples that might be quoted: “*Mathilda*, like all fiction, is of course strongly marked by the author’s life experiences” (Garrett 44); “since she finally decided not to publish *Matilda*, it is evident that [Shelley] herself perceived that the work belonged more to her personal life-story than to literature” (Spark 150); “though fictionally heightened and ruthlessly self-accusatory, the balance of the novella essentially describes Mary’s situation at that time” (Sunstein 172); “rewritten as *Matilda*, Mary’s novel is of interest chiefly as a work of self-revelation” (Seymour 235).
- 5 Ranita Chatterjee has highlighted that “it is often the case that women’s writing, regardless of genre, is read autobiographically, especially when the theme is one of possible sexual violence” (131); in the same passage, Chatterjee

- also quotes Domna Stanton's words, in whose opinion "autobiographical [is] wielded as a weapon to denigrate female texts and exclude them from the canon" (131).
- 6 Kathleen Miller argues that Mathilda "performs and controls a dramatic narrative through deployment of an incest myth in an attempt not to be victimized and submissive" (298).
  - 7 Sophia Andres has explored the tight association between *Mathilda* and Füsseli's paintings, as a "deliberate attempt" on the part of the writer "to give voice to figures whose painted silence has promoted stereotypically passive femininity" (258).
  - 8 As Michelle Faubert has underlined, the plot of *Mathilda* revolves around "the right to commit suicide. The incest theme in *Matilda* serves Shelley's main argument that suicide may be regarded as virtuous, honourable, and even socially beneficial" (*A Family Affair* 101).
  - 9 The original title of the novella, *The Fields of Fancy*, is reminiscent of Mary Wollstonecraft's unfinished *The Cave of Fancy* (Clemit 154). Clemit has also acknowledged Mary Shelley's debt to Godwin: "Mary Shelley abandons the Elysian framework of *The Fields of Fancy*, substituting a confessional account of traumatic experience in the manner of Godwin's novels from *Caleb Williams* to *Mandeville*" (157).
  - 10 An insightful summary of the scholarship on *Mathilda* is provided by Michelle Faubert in her *Introduction* to the novella (9-33). See also the numerous *Appendixes* to that edition (especially the one entitled *Family Resemblances*). In Tilottama Rajan's opinion, "*Mathilda* can be seen as 'an overflowing' 'split off' from *Valperga*" (62). I have to credit Faubert with first highlighting the connection between *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda* at the "International Bicentenary Conference on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in February 2018.
  - 11 In the 1831 *Introduction to Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley described her debut novel as her "hideous progeny" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 10).
  - 12 In *Frankenstein*, "as soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 41); in *Mathilda*, when the maiden's eyes "recovered their sight after the dazzling light, the oak no longer stood in the meadow" (Shelley, *Mathilda* 81).
  - 13 At the beginning of the novella, Mathilda gathers flowers, just like Matelda in Dante's *Purgatorio* (Canto XXVIII, the Earthly Paradise), which is almost literally quoted: "I wandered for ever about these lovely solitudes, gathering flower after flower  
Ond'era pinta tutta la mia via" (Shelley, *Mathilda* 50).

At the end of the novella, Dante is once more quoted: “I pictured to myself a lovely river such as that on whose banks Dante describes Mathilda gathering flowers, which ever flows

–bruna, bruna,

Sotto l’ombra perpetua, che mai

Raggiar non lascia sole ivi, né Luna” (109).

- 14 The very abduction of Proserpine is not staged: the episode is just recounted by one of the female characters and its tragic potential is, therefore, sensibly deflated.
- 15 The following are Mary Wollstonecraft’s words in the introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists – I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body” (76).
- 16 The original manuscript entitled *The Fields of Fancy* was endowed with a frame narrative, featuring an unnamed narrator who mourned the loss of her loved ones. Accompanied by Fantasia (an allegorical figure) to the Elysian Fields, she listened to Mathilda, while she told her sad story to Diotima, a prophetess. Probably Mary Shelley decided to remove the didactic frame narrative to highlight the isolation of her protagonist.
- 17 Lauren Gillingham maintains that “the nature of [Mathilda’s] own affection for her father is left persistently ambiguous” (267).
- 18 The element of construction and self-construction is also evident when Mathilda theatrically stages her own and Woodville’s suicide: “I planned the whole scene with an earnest heart and frantically set my soul on this project. I procured Laudanum and placing it in two glasses on the table, filled my room with flowers and decorated the last scene of my tragedy with the nicest care” (102). It could be argued that she feels intimidated by Woodville (and therefore plans his annihilation) because he considers her as a character of *his own* script, thus depriving her of authority over her life: “I am, I thought, a tragedy; a character that [Woodville] comes to see act: now and then he gives me my cue that I may make speech more to his purpose: perhaps he is already planning a poem in which I am to figure. I am a farce and a play to him” (101).
- 19 Mathilda also transgresses the boundary of gender: apart from comparing herself to Adam (not Eve) as already observed, when she was a child, she dreamt of “seek[ing] her father through the world [...] disguised like a boy” (51).



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# Parsing the Poetics of Letitia Landon's “song of grief and love”

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Letitia Elizabeth Landon was the only well-known poet of her day who made erotic love her primary theme. Being an exceptionally prolific writer, she produced one of the largest bodies of love poems in English. Love is certainly “at the centre of Landon’s poetic universe” (Stephenson, *Improvisatrice* 13), but love that is perpetually “devoted, self-sacrificing, absorbing and unsatisfied” (Bethune 275). Samuel Blanchard, Landon’s friend and biographer, sums up the salient characteristic of her poetry:

The burthen of the strain was love [...] however, love foredoomed, love linked to woe and fated to death — the hopelessness of life, the reality of pain, the mockery of life — were the prevailing topics (Blanchard 68-69).

A preliminary reading of Landon’s poetry soon establishes a pattern, and even a casual reader of her poems will see that her many narratives reiterate the same theme of melancholy love in various guises. The majority of love relationships in Landon result in inevitable heartbreak and /or death for the woman, leading the narrator in one of her poems to lament “that so often the grave should be /The seal of women’s fidelity!” (“The Broken Spell” 21–2). If the woman’s love does find that rare reciprocation, the couple is often forced into a separation that kills them. Alternatively, the man is too late in appreciating his beloved’s worth, by which time she has faded into oblivion, so that the only union possible is in the grave.

The regularity with which women suffering from unrequited love populate Landon's literary landscape has been the most noticeable characteristic of her poetry for contemporary reviews as well as recent studies. What has been less obvious is how this particular brand of melancholy love was pivotal to Landon's conscious self-marketing through a cleverly constructed professional image. Her portrayal of ill-fated love that ended in death served her economic and artistic requirements in equal measure.

These tales of disastrous love are played out across a world-map of exotic places (McGann 26). One of these places was India. This article focuses on how Landon adroitly channelised the interest of British readers about the expanding empire in the subcontinent and used it to forge her own unique poetic persona.

Landon had never seen India, but then, neither had the vast majority of her readers. They availed of the same Orientalist cultural code, the neatly compacted package offered for their consumption. Even an author like Emma Roberts, who for several years lived in India and edited the *Oriental Literary Observer* printed in Calcutta, expresses her observations refracted through the picturesque conventions of the literary Orient. Critics like Sara Suleri and Nigel Leask have explored how the picturesque was a method employed to contain the subcontinental threats by accommodating them within a familiar aesthetic. The Indian ruins, so favoured by the Victorian annuals to which Landon was a regular contributor, were the perfect backdrop to the tales that Landon wanted to tell. Landon produced more than sixty poems for *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrapbook* where she "ventriloquised" India, as it were, through her ekphrastic art. "The Jumma Musjid," "The Cootub Minar," "The Caves of Elephanta," "The Assar Mahal," all speak of a mighty civilisation in ruins, of an inscrutable past of mystery and mysticism. Critics like Vanessa Warne have remarked how in poems like "Hindoo and Mahomeddan Buildings," a response to a sketch by Captain Robert Melville Grindlay, Landon hints at India's glorious past even as she readies it as an empty space to be renewed by British imperialism.

India's picturesque ruins favoured by the Victorian annuals also became the perfect backdrop for Landon's trademark romances. India provided an apt frame that was a rich blend of the luxurious and the exotic for this play of passions, with her characteristic abundance of lavish descriptions that embellish the familiar mournful narratives. The "Zenana,"

for example, uses eighteen images by Captain Elliot to narrate the tragic tale of the slave girl and singer Zilara. Landon's narratives seldom fail to comply with the usual pattern summarized by a contemporary reviewer:

A youthful pair invariably find themselves, at the commencement of the romance, in the ecstatic state of feeling usually termed being in love. The heroine is uniformly represented as perfectly beautiful [...] The hero also possesses his share of personal attractions [...] Such being the dramatis personae, the next question is, where to place them (McGann 306).

Landon's poetic tales are careful about the details and settings of a romantic union. The play of passion in its purest form is aptly framed in a narrative backdrop that is a rich blend of the luxurious and the exotic. The relationship might be frustrated in the end, but Landon ascertains that it is initiated and played out without restraint and with the proper embellishments.

Landon's poems swell into waves of lavish descriptions that embellish the familiar narrative, piling images and details ceaselessly. Germaine Greer remarks: "No other woman of her time had anything like her vigour in imaginings, and few men could equal her headlong kaleidoscopic rush through scene after scene to her almost unfailingly tragic conclusion" (Greer 265). Her tales move through the replacement of one tableau after another, each bearing the signature abundance of sensual descriptions. Her settings, though varying in name, retain the same tumult of extravagance that Glennis Stephenson describes:

Halls are radiant or gorgeous, paintings have the colours of the rainbow, leaves never wither, flowers breathe exquisite perfumes, and the very language takes on the qualities of music. Nothing is muted or repressed; it is a world of fiery and bright extremes, [...] and everyone and everything exudes poetry (*Improvisatrice* 56).

The foreknowledge of the inescapable death of the protagonists also imparts greater poignancy to their brief periods of passion. The flawless beauties and Regency pin-up males peopling Landon's sensually overwrought poetic landscapes perform the key role of contrast, their beauty heightened, as in Keats's odes, by the awareness of death that is to follow. They help to distil maximum emotional affect from the tragic culmination of the love story. She renders her portrayal of an impossibly

pure love flourishing against an exquisite backdrop even more attractive by placing it under the constant threat of death. The more exquisite the construct, the greater becomes the readers' emotional response at its annihilation. Landon shows her awareness of this in her poem "A Summer Evening's Tale" when she says: "the chronicle I told / Began with hope, fair skies, and lovely shapes, / And ended in despair" (227-9).

But why did Landon decide on and keep repeating this motif of melancholic love? Three letters will explain why – L.E.L.

The process of shrewd publicity that led to such gushing commendation started with her first publications in *The Literary Gazette* in the early 1820s. From the beginning she and her editor William Jerdan understood the importance of a brand name, and the shrewd use of her initials L.E.L. established just the right amount of tantalizing mystery around this new literary talent entering the market to keep up public interest. In 1831 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, writing for the *New Monthly Magazine*, recalled that at college:

[...] there was always in the reading-room of the Union a rush every Saturday afternoon for the *Literary Gazette*, and an impatient anxiety to hasten at once to the corner of the sheet which contained the three magical letters "L.E.L." And all of us praised the verse and all of us guessed at the author. We soon learned it was a female, and our admiration was doubled, and our conjectures tripled. Was she young? Was she pretty? And was she rich? (McGann 331).

When Jerdan revealed that the author was a young lady yet in her teens, scores of young men promptly fell in love with her. Anne Mellor notes that "Bulwer-Lytton and his peers eagerly identified the 'magical letters' L.E.L. with a feminine youthful beauty and wealth that might be *possessed* by a male Oxford undergraduate" (110), recognizing that Landon "commodified herself as a purchasable icon of feminine beauty" (112).

Mellor reads Landon as "a Romantic woman writer [who] chooses to inhabit rather than reject the hegemonic construction of the ideal woman," constructing "both her life and her poetry as an embodiment of Burke's female beauty" (110). Her portraits, her annuals, the subject matter of her poems all conformed to the idea of female beauty and propriety.

This article reads Landon's allegiance to established conventions as a conscious career strategy rather than unchallenging compliance, destabilizing the very principles she professed to accept. But to be fully

comprehended her subversion needs to be analyzed against the extent of her success in marketing herself as the beautiful poetess.

The chief concept behind Landon's phenomenal commercial success was the carefully scripted persona of L. E. L. that Stephenson identifies as the primary text of which all her poems were in a sense subtexts (7). That Landon was keen to package her poetry under features associated with the popular literary label L.E.L. is apparent in her signing her poems with these initials but not her acerbic reviews and other prose works. Once *The Improvisatrice* and *Other Poems* (1824) became a bestseller and consolidated the success of her earlier poems in the *Literary Gazette* (the first appeared on 11 March, 1820), her trope of tragic love got established as a commercially secure strategy, and the characteristic Landon tone was defined.

Thus one obvious reason for using a familiar formula repeatedly that puzzles many modern readers of Landon is simply that it sold well. A few critics might have had their reservations against an incessant stream of cheerless love stories, but the reading public lapped it up. But they were in the minority. And being an astute business woman with a finger on the pulse of the market, Landon was always ready to provide her devoted readers with new instalments of love's ill-fated course. Landon was a prodigious writer, and remarks on it herself in one of her letters to her friend Mrs Thomson, dated July – Aug, 1826: "I have been both bodily and intellectually industrious. I have written poetry 'by the pound'" (Blanchard 61).

Coupled with the familiar plot was the distinctive voice. Words like "charming, tender, graceful, tasteful, sweet, and delicate" recur in reviews of L.E.L. around this time, indicating that she had developed an easily recognized poetic voice. Landon's clichés made her an easy target for parody such as this one by Lady Blessington:

Wither'd hopes, and faded flowers,  
Beauties pining in their bowers;  
Broken harps and untuned lyres;  
Lutes neglected, unquenched fires; [...]  
Pale disease feeds on the cheek,  
Health how feeble – head how weak –  
Bursting tear and endless sigh –  
Query, can she tell us why?  
(Keepsake 208-9)

But such lampooning proves more than any positive reviews that Landon's success was now secure enough to provoke envy (Blessington was Landon's competitor in the lucrative market for supplying poems for the popular annuals of the day). Parodies like the one above are perhaps the strongest evidence that Landon equalled a literary style that could be identified in order to be ridiculed. Very shortly after she appeared in print, L.E.L. had become an unmistakable literary presence.

Landon's care to posit such a public persona stemmed, as it did for most women writing at the time, from her awareness of her gender's lack of authority even after she became a successful poet, as a letter dated June 1826 to her friend Mrs Thomson reveals:

Your own literary pursuits must have taught you how little, in them, a young woman can do without assistance. Place yourself in my situation. Could you have hunted London for a publisher, endured all the alternate hot and cold water thrown on your exertions; bargained for what sum they might be pleased to give and, after all, canvassed, examined, nay quarrelled over accounts the most intricate in the world? And again, after success had procured money, what was I to do with it? Though ignorant of business, I must know I could not lock it up in a box. Then, for literary assistance, my proof sheets could not go through the press without revision. Who was to undertake this – I can only call it drudgery – but someone to whom my literary exertions could in return be as valuable as theirs to me? (Blanchard I 55-56)

Adding to liabilities of gender were financial compulsions that forced her to support not only herself but her mother and brother by her writing, subjecting her to public exposure. Forced into writing for economic compulsions like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and to a certain extent Amelia Opie, Landon was conscious of the vulnerability of her position through the double disadvantages of gender and class. Being a public figure, Landon became the subject of several scandals. In 1826 her name was linked to her publisher William Jerdan with whom she had a close working relationship and to whom she had dedicated *The Troubadour* in 1825. The gutter press was quick to target a successful woman living independently (Landon had moved out of her mother's house recently), leading Landon to complain:

I think of the treatment I have received until my very soul writhes under the powerlessness of its anger. It is only because I am poor, unprotected and dependant on popularity, that I am a mark for all the gratuitous insolence and malice of



idleness and ill-nature. And I cannot but feel deeply that had I been possessed of rank and opulence, either these remarks had never been made, or if they had, how trivial would their consequence have been to me (Blanchard 54).

Landon's need to succeed commercially thus necessitated the construction of L.E.L., a distillation of ideal contemporary femininity aimed at courting public approval. Playing on rumours of her youth and beauty, Landon flirted with critics by subjecting to their attention her body of poetry that was unambiguously and unthreateningly feminine. This process of persona-building, which Landon continued throughout her career, reveals itself to be remarkably subtle and effective, as when she reiterates how she has always been careful to honour the limits of her womanly sphere:

I have told passionate tales of breaking hearts,  
Of young cheeks fading even before the rose;  
My songs have been the mournful history  
Of woman's tenderness and woman's tears;  
I have touch'd but the spirit's gentlest chords, –  
Surely the fittest for my maiden hand;  
("Erinna" 347-52)

Apparently justifying the propriety of her subject, the speaker teases her readers coyly by advertising her virginity. The mention of her "maiden hand" strengthens the idea that her publisher William Jerdan had given out to her readers (and one of the few things that her curious admirers knew about her), that the "sweet poems" published under the signature L.E.L. were by "a lady, yet in her teens" (Stephenson, *Landon* 98).

The magic of the three enigmatic letters L.E.L. conjured up the image of the mysterious lady poet who held a unique appeal for readers like Bulwer Lytton in being passionate yet pure. But the emphasis that both Landon and Jerdan place on her "maiden" innocence is given a darker undertone by the recent discovery of biographical facts about the author. Cynthia Lawford has published evidence that Landon, thought to have died young with no children after a late marriage to George Maclean, the governor of Cape Coast in West Africa, had an affair lasting more than a decade with Jerdan, who fathered her three illegitimate children. Cynthia Lawford's theory, published in the *London Review of Books*, 22, no 18, 21

September 2000, is one of the most controversial biographical scholarly conjectures about Landon till date.

L.E.L. lost no opportunity to voice her belief that women should write only about subjects that are “properly feminine,” as in these lines from “The Golden Violet:”

A fairy castle, not of those  
Made for storm and made for foes,  
But telling of a gentler time,  
A lady’s rule, a summer clime. (33- 6)

She often alludes to the idea of separate and gendered poetic spheres, emphasising in the process that love is a feminine domain. In “A Summer Evening’s Tale,” the female narrator starts by drawing the male lover and reader closer into a cosiness that is relaxingly feminine, away from the energetic masculine “worldly element”. She is here telling her lover a story, but her first person address allows Landon to direct her argument at the reader, positioning him as her one–man audience and making love to him through her words: I’ll tell thee, love, a tale, — just such a tale / As you once said my lips could breathe so well; / Speaking as poetry should speak of love,” (12-4).

Reminding the reader that he had been appreciative of her earlier strains of passion and had agreed that it was the proper subject of poetry is her way of urging him to receive the present volume with equal enthusiasm.

Her strategy worked. Reviewers who found fault with her theme of despondent love were in the minority, and met with indignant attacks: “Some impertinent blockhead [...] informed this young lady that love was a very dull and monotonous subject” (McGann 326). In opting to make love her key subject, Landon thus positioned herself blamelessly vis-à-vis the critics’ preconceptions of a female author’s permissible literary territory, ensuring their support in her initial rise to celebrity.

In the preface to *The Venetian Bracelet* Landon says:

I allude to the blame and eulogy which have been equally bestowed on my frequent choice of Love as my source of song. I can only say, that for a woman, whose influence and whose sphere must be in the affections, what subject can be more fitting than one which it is her peculiar province to refine, spiritualise, and exalt? I have ways sought to paint it self-denying, devoted, and making an almost religion of its truth; and I must add, that such as I would wish to draw her, woman actuated

by an attachment as intense as it is true, as pure as it is deep, is not only more admirable as a heroine, but also in actual life, than one whose idea of love is that of light amusement or at worst of vain mortification (McGann 103).

Landon's argument reveals a shrewd strategy. She turns the criticism against herself — that she wrote too much about love — on its head by employing precisely those prescriptions that were used to limit women writers. Women were restricted to writing about sentiment and feeling, and Landon uses that as her defence now: for a woman whose influence and whose sphere must be in the affections, what subject can be more fitting than one which it is her peculiar province to refine, spiritualise, and exalt? Subtly but surely she turns the idea of a womanly sphere into a woman-only area, establishes her mastery over it, and wards off any male intervention. Categorising all poetry as being either “song of love or tale of war” (*The Venetian Bracelet* 274), she makes her choice of the former and stands firmly by it. In effect she says that she is happy with the limited poetic field she is allocated as a woman poet within which she has proved successful and sees no cause to change her theme.

Landon bolsters this exclusivity by reinforcing her chosen theme with the weight of moral purpose; not only is her subject pretty, it has the added value of virtue. Declaring her portrayal of passion to be pure — “self-denying, devoted, and making almost a religion of its truth [...] as intense as it is true, as pure as it is deep,” she makes a case for its ability to motivate moral improvement. Her love songs often find their best justification in inspiring a purer love in her readers:

yet if one line  
Has stolen from the eye unconscious tears,  
Recalled one lover to fidelity  
Which is the holiness of love, or bade  
One maiden sicken at cold vanity, [...]  
That song has not been utterly in vain.  
 (“A Summer Evening's Tale” 70-4, 78)

Poetry and love are Landon's two chief agencies in her declared aspiration to heal an ailing civilization. Love “[c]an melt away the dross of worldliness; / Can elevate, refine” (“A History of the Lyre” 365 -6), while poetry is the “rich enthusiasm”

without which our utmost power of thought  
But sharpens arrows that will drink our blood.  
Like woman's soothing influence o'er man,  
Enthusiasm is upon the mind;  
("Erinna" 111- 4)

L.E.L. subtly genders poetry as feminine, as in the lines above, and suggests that poetry about women's love should be the best instrument in this restorative project:

Love should dwell with that purity  
Which but in woman's love can be:  
A sacred fire, whose flame was given  
To shed on earth the light of heaven,  
("The Troubadour" Canto II, 813)

The ameliorative powers that Landon claimed for her poetry can be seen allegorised in an episode from "The Golden Violet" where Mirzala must save her lover from a fatal spell – "He is bound by magic spell, / Of force which woman's love may quell" (74-5). Like Psyche in Mary Tighe's eponymous epic, she goes on a quest to win her love, challenging the notion of female passivity. But her assumption of the role of the (traditionally male) quester-rescuer in one of her rare tales that end happily evades censure because the essentially feminine impulse of love offers an excuse for the infraction.

Landon professes no less an end for her poetry than ennobling the reader through catharsis brought about by her "gentle mournfulness" that intends: "To purify, refine, exalt, subdue, / To touch the selfish, and to shame the vain / Out of themselves," ("A Summer Evening's Tale" 54-6).

The narrator follows this general argument with a personal illustration, "Am I not better by my love for you?" (80). Mournfulness thus becomes a necessary adjunct of love, vital for Landon's project if she is to arouse the readers' "sympathy with sorrows not [their] own" (48).

If writing about love is an extension of Landon's public image of feminine beauty, then giving that love a doomed destiny introduces the essential element of melancholy Landon specifically refutes the possibility of writing about more cheerful situations, demarcating happy love to lie beyond her poetic ambit.

what has minstrel left to tell  
When love has not an obstacle?  
My lute is hush'd, and mute its chords,  
The heart and happiness have no words!  
("The Troubadour" Canto IV, 707-10)

One justification for L.E.L.'s melancholy theme is thus inextricably linked to the moral function of her poetry in attempting the amelioration of her readers, as discussed above. She makes this clear in the preface to *The Venetian Bracelet*, a thought that is reiterated in her other prefaces too:

Believing as I do in the great and excellent influence of poetry, may I hazard the expression of what I have myself sometimes trusted to do? A highly-cultivated state of society must ever have for concomitant evils, that selfishness, the result of indolent indulgence; and that heartlessness attendant on refinement, which too often hardens while it polishes. Aware that to elevate I must first soften, and that if I wished to purify I must first touch, I have ever endeavoured to bring forward grief, disappointment, the fallen leaf, the faded flower, the broken heart, and the early grave. Surely we must be less worldly, less interested, from this sympathy with the sorrow in which our unselfish feelings alone can take part (McGann 102-3).

Armstrong reads Landon's statement as extending "the sentimental terms in which women were seen [...] turning them to moral and social account and arguing that women's discourse can soften what would now be called the phallogocentric hardness and imaginative deficiencies of an overcivilized culture" (Armstrong 328).

Landon's preference for tragedy also served her more feminist inclinations tacitly. Ordeals allow the women in her romances to emerge loyal in love. Landon continuously presents her protagonists with obstacles in order to argue her case for women being the more committed partners in any love relationship:

There is a feeling in the heart  
Of woman which can have no part  
In man; a self devotedness  
As victims round their idols press,  
And ask for nothing, but to show  
How far their zeal and faith can go.  
("The Troubadour" Canto II, 1050-5)

Even if the man does love his mistress, he will fall short of the ideal set by his ladylove, “For ever in man’s bosom will man’s pride / An equal empire with his love divide” (“The Golden Violet” 305-6). Landon, in one of her sketches in the *Female Picture Gallery*, remarks: “I believe that more women are disappointed in marriage than men; a woman gives the whole of her heart — the man only gives the remains of his, and very often there is only a little left” (Blanchard 151). Elsewhere, she repeats Madame de Stael’s despairing query in one of the pieces in her *Female Picture Gallery*, “[...] by whom have we been beloved, even as we have loved!” (Blanchard 163). In “The Golden Violet,” Isabelle initially sings of love as “being fugitive”; when her lover Vidal disapproves of her cynicism, she changes to a song extolling constancy, but qualifies that this is “a woman’s love” that she praises. Landon’s tales of melancholy love have a specifically female focus; as Anne Mellor notes, “her poetry obsessively details every nuance of female love” (Mellor 114).

Landon’s protagonists, who are often artists, require the compulsion of grief for composition, aligning their poetry with the artless outburst of (female) improvisation brought on by unbearable anguish rather than the conscious construct of (male) artistry ambitiously aimed at literary fame. Betrayal offers Landon’s women an opportunity to speak. Her female poets seek to excuse their outpouring as being induced by their heart. Landon’s heartbroken female poet-protagonist declares:

And lays which only told of love  
 In all its varied sorrowing,  
 The echoes of the broken heart,  
 Were all the songs I now could sing.  
 (The Improvisatrice 1011- 4)

In poems where the female lover is not herself a poet, the narrator – always implicitly, and at times explicitly identified as female – reveals herself to be a world-weary figure, well versed in the way of love, having experienced the treachery of men herself: Alas! that man should ever win / So sweet a shrine to shame and sin /As woman’s heart! (“The Improvisatrice” 600-2).

Often at the cost of distracting from the main narrative, the female narrator breaks into reminiscences of her own loss and enhancing the tragic atmosphere, as in the heavily digressional “The Lost Pleiad.”

Men and women seem to channel their thoughts in two different directions in Landon – while the former more often anticipate future sexual pleasures with their desired partners, the latter remain nostalgic about happy days when their love seemed secure. Women also risk being judged by men according to their terms, as Prince Cyrus does in “The Lost Pleiad.” This is the account of a prince who falls in love with the youngest of the pleiads, the daughters of the sea god, and woos her earnestly, only to abandon her when she comes to return his love. Tiring of Cyrene, the prince conveniently (and falsely) assumes that she wants to end the relationship as much as he does:

he, rejoicing he is free  
Bounds like the captive from his chain,  
And wilfully believing she  
Hath found her liberty again! (395-8)

Landon remarks that men tire of their trophy as soon as it is possessed. She contrasts them with the woman’s heart “[t]hat has pleasure and pride in a prize when won” (“The Broken Spell” 16).

As Landon locates her female protagonists so fully in the category of ideal femininity current in her time, by their very definition the women in her poems seem to expend their whole existence in loving:

It is vain to say that love is not  
The life and colour of a woman’s lot.  
It is her strength [...]  
It is her pride [...]  
[...] O man has power  
Of head and hand, – heart is a woman’s dower!  
(“The Rose” 228-36)

Landon takes the essentialist perception of the ideal woman as the one whose entire existence is founded on love in order to exposes its inherent absurdity. When their love fails to find fulfilment, woman’s life finds no other purpose, leaving death to follow as a natural consequence. Remarkably, Landon introduces no relief in the promise of another world where the women may be rewarded for their trials on earth. Mellor notes that they show “no conviction of an afterlife; when love dies, they die” (Mellor 120) Love is the only religion to which Landon’s women are martyrs.

That the repeated deaths of her protagonists were not mere coincidences is clarified by Landon's own correspondence, as in this letter to her cousin:

The poem is now entirely finished. I hope you will like "Adelaide". I wished to pourtray [sic] a gentle soft character, and to paint in her the most delicate love. I fear her dying of it is a little romantic; yet, what was I to do, as her death must terminate it? (Blanchard I 27)

While death usually haunts L.E.L.'s pages in its physical form, it may at times be manifest symbolically. In the rare case that the women in her poems survive the catastrophic end of a relationship, they are reduced to a mere shadow of her former self only to endure a death-like state: Wasting her dearest feelings, till health, hope, / Happiness, are but things of which henceforth / She'll only know the name? ("Love" 18-20).

This article argues that the death of the woman — literal or symbolic — in Landon's poems is such a regular feature because it executes several important functions in her poetry. Landon often portrays the death of a beautiful woman who is a poet herself. Landon's poetic universe "teems with poets and minstrels" (Stephenson, *Landon* 1) Many of Landon's female protagonists are famous artists who enjoy the prominence their talent affords them. They offer Landon a way to express the essence of being a woman, a lover, and an artist, often in the figure of the same character. "The two themes to which Landon returns obsessively in all her poetry and which for her were indissolubly linked [...] [were] Love and Poetry" (Mellor 114), a combination always closely attended upon by death.

Love and poetry, apart from working together for moral purposes as discussed above, share many qualities in Landon's universe. Firstly, her women artists compose and love in a similar gush of emotion, a natural effusion that lies beyond their control. They are improvisatrices, and their poetry is seen as being stimulated in a state of delirium, not scripted in deliberation. Landon was inspired, as were many others among her contemporaries, by the success of Madame de Stael's *Corinne*, which related the story of a gifted woman poet who was inspired into brilliant improvisations that led to her being honoured publicly. Landon's poetesses seem to compose their verses with the same spontaneous abandon as they love — unreservedly, and with little command over their acts of passion.



This idea of spontaneous artistic creation conforms to the theory of genius that was so significant in Landon's time, and she was quick to reinforce the connection between woman and creator using the context of love:

I loved him as young Genius loves,  
When its own wild and radiant heavens  
Of starry thought burns with the light,  
The love, the life, by passion given.  
I loved him, too, as woman loves –  
Reckless of sorrow, sin, or scorn:  
("The Improvisatrice" 959-64)

Landon's protagonists are careful to maintain creative distance from male poets by modestly acknowledging that theirs is "but a woman's power." But this does not stop them from staking their claim to genius;

Yet, in that great and glorious dower  
Which Genius gives, I had my part:  
I poured my full and burning heart  
In song  
("The Improvisatrice" 26-9)

Most memoirs and prefaces by women poets would be at pains to illustrate how their literary compositions were a completely instinctive and unselfconscious process. Similarly Blanchard is eager to defend Landon's commercial success by portraying it as an entirely natural development of familial encouragement:

Pen and ink had succeeded to the slate, writing to scribbling, distinct images to phantasies that had as little form as substance; and it followed that ideas of publication and a thirst for fame should succeed to the first natural charm of parental kisses and family pats on the head (25).

As is characteristic of her, Landon seems to accept what is a liability for a woman writer only to turn it into an advantage. The article discusses above how she appropriates the idea of gendered segregation of poetic themes to consolidate her own mastery over love poetry as a woman. Similarly, when she comes to repeat the familiar defensive script that

all women poets forwarded about the artlessness of their compositions, Landon takes it one step further by asserting that no art is needed to begin with as women are poets by the virtue of their very nature. Women, being traditionally positioned as more sensitive, are the only true and natural poets. She links the two ideas in timeless permanency: “The fable of Prometheus and the vulture / Reveals the poet’s and the woman’s heart” (“Felicia Hemans” 55-6). Her female poets do not feel the need to evoke a male muse; women’s greater sensitivity to sorrow an adequate stimulus for poetry.

“The Improvisatrice” reveals how the very basis of her identity as a woman is formulated by her artistic self:

I AM the daughter of that land,  
Where the poet’s lip and the painter’s hand  
Are most divine,—where the earth and sky,  
Are picture both and poetry —  
I am of Florence. (1-5)

Her assertion of individuality (“I am”) is predicated by both her gender (“the daughter”) and her cultural and artistic heritage. Gender is the primary principle in the formulation of the Improvisatrice’s poetic self, suggesting that all women are poets. Her being born in a land that exudes and encourages poetry allows her natural talent to develop into unparalleled brilliance.

If Landon’s women poets are “improvisatrices” in the sense of being extempore artists, as is de Stael’s Corinne who served as their model, they are also public performers like her. The word “improvisatrice” connotes ideas of improvisation and performance simultaneously, and Landon’s poetesses are all involved in a public exhibition of their apparently spontaneous flood of emotion. Critics have identified *Corinne* as the “definitive text” of the woman author in the nineteenth century (Moers 173). Landon knew the story well, having translated the metrical odes for Isabel Hill’s 1833 English version of *Corinne*. She returns to the narrative in several poems, notably “Corinna” (1821), “The Improvisatrice” (1824), “Erinna” (1827), “The History of the Lyre” (1828), “Corinne at the Cape of Misena” (1832) and “Sappho” in *Classical Sketches* (1836). Adapting de Stael’s controversial novel *Corinne: or, Italy* (1807) for a British readership, Landon takes care to underplay the more radically feminist aspects of the earlier work. She eliminates the

crowning of the poetess in the Capitol in Rome that made many male readers uncomfortable with its suggestion of female apotheosis. The Improvisatrice, like all of Landon's poet-protagonists, attempts to justify the public display of her poetry by portraying it as a means of securing love. This is the closest link poetry shares with love for Landon – it literalizes the woman's craving for affection. Erinna visualizes her lute to be:

a sweet and breathing bond  
Between me and my kind. Orphan unloved,  
I had been lonely from my childhood's hour, [...]  
But that was over now; my lyre would be  
My own heart's true interpreter, and those  
To whom my song was dear, would they not bless  
The hand that waken'd it? I should be loved  
For the so gentle sake of those soft chords  
Which mingled others' feelings with mine own. (43-5, 47-50)

The fact that most of Landon's female protagonists are either orphans (like Eulalie in "A History of the Lyre") or lack a loving family network (like the Improvisatrice) heightens their desperation for love. Being natural poets who sing as spontaneously as they love, the women exercise their poetic power to win their men. Their compositions are usually ineffectual in securing true love, but they do allow the women to enjoy fame, which becomes an extension of the feminine desire to be loved – by many instead of one. Landon is once supposed to have remarked:

I would give all the reputation I have gained, or am ever likely to gain, by writing books, for one great triumph on the stage. The praise of critics or friends may be more or less sincere; but the spontaneous thunder of applause of a mixed multitude of strangers, uninfluenced by any feelings but those excited at the moment, is an acknowledgement of gratification surpassing, in my opinion, any other description of approbation" (Planché 103).

Barrett Browning was one of the earliest readers of Landon who identified the older poet's narrators as the "craver[s] of a little love," but who were forever disappointed in their expectation of an equal response to their own unadulterated passion. She expressed their petition poignantly in her tribute in "L.E.L.'s Last Question." She described her predecessor as "[l]ove-learned, she had sung of only love" (15):

little in this world do the loving do,  
But [...] listen for  
The echo of their own love evermore –  
Do you think of me as I think of you? (11-4)  
(McGann 365)

Christina Rossetti followed Browning in her reading of L.E.L. as a poet whose “heart was breaking for a little love” (McGann 381).

The poetic powers of Landon’s women, though successful in securing public admiration, cannot secure their happiness. Unqualified love on their part is bound to end in sorrow in Landon’s asymmetrical universe where men fall short of the ideal set by female devotion. Like Amenaide in “The Golden Violet,” Landon’s women are “[k]ind, tender but too sensitive, / None seem’d her equal love to bear” (79-80). Female passions double back to collapse at their point of origin, finding no suitable alter ego to interact with: “How often women’s heart must turn / To feed upon its own excess / Of deep yet passionate tenderness!” (“The Troubadour” Canto I 500-2).

A careful analysis of this failed female passion suggests that it encapsulates the condition of its failure in its very nature. Women’s love in Landon remains unrequited by its very nature, resulting “ideologically [...] [in a] poetry [that] implodes upon itself” (Mellor 120). Belonging to the realm of the ideal and the literary, women’s love seems to wither upon coming in touch with reality, as the last lines of “The Lost Pleiad” observe: “Love is of heavenly birth, / But turns to death on touching earth” (473-4). The world contaminates the woman’s gift fatally, with “soil and stain that clings / When earth [Love] touchest with [its] heavenly wings” (“The Golden Violet” 206-7). Jacqueline Labbe reads “the villain in Landon’s romances” to be “Love – Romance – itself, with its dangerous, unavoidable excesses” (171). But love in Landon seems more victim than villain in a contaminating world. What Stephenson says of the notion of poetry for Landon is equally applicable to the love expressed by her protagonists – “Landon is actually not so much rejecting it as suggesting the general inability of a base world to appreciate” (*Improvisatrice* 111): “that love which hath too much / Of heaven in its fine nature for the earth – / Where love pines for a home and finds a grave;” (“Corinne at the Cape of Misena” 46-9).

Germaine Greer feels that “[n]o female poet before L. E. L. had ever written of women’s passion as she did. It was not like the love complaints of men, but the fierce, impotent, inward – turning tumult of a woman’s

heart, the agony of a creature unable to speak or act, forced to wreak her vengeance upon herself, to refuse to live” (275).

Landon’s tales end by predictably leaving the women broken-hearted, for in an imperfect world “[w]hat had such heart to do but break?” (“The Golden Violet” 284). Woman’s love is one which no reality may match: “Where on earth is the truth that may vie /With woman’s lone and long constancy?” (“The Golden Violet”1-2). Her love is too pure to find reciprocation in an imperfect world, as Eulalie realizes:

I made  
My heart too like a temple for a home;  
My thoughts were birds of paradise, that breathed  
The airs of heaven, but died on touching earth.  
 (“A History of the Lyre” 336-9)

Landon’s women appear more besotted with love itself than with any man. The female poet often berates her lover for upsetting her imaginary universe with his all-too-real presence before turning back to her own solitary world:

Once my wide world was ideal,  
Fair it was –ah! very fair,  
Wherefore hast thou made it real?  
Wherefore is thy image there?  
 (“Disenchantment” 39-40)

India played an important role in this process of identity building that was carefully crafted by Landon over the years of her career as a poet. “Indian” values of loyalty and sacrifice displayed by colonised female subjects like the Hindoo widow or the Indian bride women added depth and drama to her chosen theme. The speaker of “Fishing Boats in Monsoon” awaits her lover’s return, the “Hindoo Mother” mourns her child, the “Hindoo Girl” hopes for the fulfilment of her dreams of love, “The Nizam’s Daughter” conceals her emotions in her veils, the bandit’s woman in “Scene in Kattiawar” is happy in her fetters. Whether dreaming of a man or mourning because of him, living with him or dying for him, Landon’s Indian female figures reiterate qualities of her western protagonists. Landon establishes a correspondence with the colonised woman in order to demonstrate that the condition of female oppression is universal. She used

colonial alterity to explore the condition of women in her own society. The annual poems consolidate a single image of the ideal feminine under the guise of variety.

Lata Mani, in her study on sati in colonial India, identified two mutually exclusive ways of representing women – as heroines able to withstand the raging blaze of the funeral pyre or else as pathetic victims coerced against their will into the flames” (162). Landon chooses the first version, as in her “Bayadere,” where the brief mention of the burning pile is quickly succeeded by the promise of immortality, the reward won by the woman’s love, faith and devotion. Her later work “Immolation of a Hindoo Widow,” like Maria Jane Jewsbury’s “Song of the Hindoo Women,” concentrates on glorious sacrifice and the widow’s apotheosis rather than the heat of the fire.

But to see the sati’s pyre as just the colonial corollary of the untimely death of Landon’s tragic female protagonists is to miss an important purpose India served for her. A few lines from “The Improvisatrice” will explain this. The protagonist readies herself for great passion even before she meets her lover Lorenzo:

As yet I loved not; – but each wild  
High thought I nourished raised a pyre  
For love to light; and lighted once  
By love, it would be like the fire  
The burning lava floods that dwell  
In Etna’s cave unquenchable. (185-90)

The image of the pyre anticipates its literal counterpart, as in the Hindoo bride’s tale, which will also end the Improvisatrice’s young life. Coupled with such intimation of mortality is the raw sexual energy of the female speaker which surprises in its intensity. The image of the “burning lava floods” hints at the great violence and destruction of which female love is capable. The lines suggest an inexhaustible, multi-orgasmic female desire that has been incited by art, making men redundant in the young poetess’s autoerotic pleasures. Landon’s protagonist reveals an unconsummated female sexuality that pre-dates the man and is also predatory in its violence. Germaine Greer feels that “[n]o female poet before L.E.L. had ever written of women’s passion as she did.” (275). She appears more interested in exploring her own sensuality – her throbbing pulse, her beating heart, her

crimsoning cheek, her warm tears, her dimming sight, her panting soul – than in taking the relationship with the man any further.

Passages like the above explain the occasional charge of immodesty that cropped up: But given the potency of Landon's sexually evocative passages that interspersed her poetry, the fact that she escaped more such allegations proves the effectiveness of her public image. The foreignness of settings like India proved effective as a safety valve to such passionate outpourings unbecoming a woman. The sati's pyre carefully cauterised – through difference and distance – discourses of desire, the unconsummated female eroticism that Landon could trade in without treading impropriety charges.

Death serves many practical purposes in Landon's works. It distances the author from her creations after having established her affinity with her protagonists which was necessary for her persona-building project. It serves a similar purpose for the readers. Exercises in wish fulfilment with their colourful characters and settings, the romances allowed them a glimpse of a land beyond their reach for the price of a volume. The death of the protagonist secures a split in the identification process, halting the readers' emotional involvement. They close the volume at the end of the heroine's life, ready for the next tragic tale offering a new protagonist, with a new man to love and be tormented by, complete with a new setting – and another one after that. Death draws the curtain in L.E.L.'s serialized, measured performance.

This theory of delimitation is borne out by Landon's unfailing preference of foreign locations for her romances. At the end of the tale, the dead heroine and her story are sealed into the distance afforded by the foreign and the unfamiliar, but not before they have served their purpose. And India particularly, went beyond serving as just another exotic setting or providing a gallery of characters, it played a part in the process of shaping Landon's poetic persona. Like the material spoils of the empire, the Victorian brand name L.E.L was a popular consumable product, and the intensity, excess and foreignness of female Indian identity was an essential component in its construction.

Note: All references to Landon's poems are from McGann, Jerome, et al., editors. *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Works*. Broadview Press, 1998.



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# Rendez-vous avec l’histoire: Raphaël Élizé dans le roman de Gaston-Paul Effa

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“People can be slave ships in shoes”  
Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

“Quand vous entendez dire du mal des juifs, dressez l’oreille, on parle de vous”  
Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*

Romancier et essayiste d’origine camerounaise,<sup>1</sup> Gaston-Paul Effa a le mérite de s’éloigner souvent des thèmes traditionnels de la fiction africaine avec une prose lumineuse, où s’alternent onirisme, réalisme, interrogation philosophique. Entré en littérature avec *Tout ce bleu* en 1996 – histoire d’un enfant confié par son père aux missionnaires du Saint-Esprit à Yaoundé qui l’enverront vivre en France –, l’écrivain publie deux ans plus tard *Mâ*, suite du roman précédant, un hymne au bonheur et à la douleur de la maternité en Afrique, se focalisant sur la mère de l’enfant enlevé et sur son parcours initiatique entrepris dans l’espoir de ramener son fils à elle. Dans *Cheval-Roi*, Effa raconte l’aventure d’un Français, Louis, marqué par une enfance sombre et malheureuse, qui décide de partir pour un travail volontaire au Bénin où il sera vivifié par la pluie drue d’une tempête africaine et par la simplicité profonde des villageois auprès desquels il s’installe. Ce même roman met au centre de l’intrigue

les animaux, notamment un cheval. L'amour pour celui-ci déterminera la vie du héros. Après l'avoir sauvé de l'abattoir, Louis accomplira son destin grâce à ce quadrupède, se réconciliant ainsi avec la vie et dans ses relations avec les autres êtres humains. Le traumatisme de l'exil, vécu sur la peau des personnages, offre à Gaston-Paul Effa l'opportunité de questionner les tréfonds de l'âme humaine en équilibre entre l'ici et l'ailleurs, la mémoire et l'oubli, des thèmes qu'il reprend de manière insolite dans *Je la voulais lointaine*, narration aux consonances autobiographiques parue chez Actes Sud en 2012, où il déploie la narration du départ pour la France d'un jeune homme africain, petit-fils de féticheur, de ses études en philosophie à son métier de professeur, soulignant son intention d'écrire et enfin le retour et la réconciliation avec sa terre natale. À ce propos, le héros représente son désir d'Europe comme un élan inconscient qui le libérerait du fatras de la mémoire collective africaine et de son passé:

Aller au pays de Montaigne, de Chateaubriand et de Rimbaud m'intéressait moins que la perspective de fuir cette terre miennne, et ces liens inextricables. Ainsi, traverser les océans et, par ce geste, la mémoire honteuse de tout un continent, tout ensemble anticipait et amplifiait ma volonté de n'avoir plus jamais d'obligations vis-à-vis de personne – ma famille comprise. Je m'étais même demandé si ce n'était pas mon double spirituel qui avait prié la nature de m'éloigner, de me porter vers ce pays où il n'y a pas d'arbres, où les hommes sont sans ombre, où le bitume recouvre partout la terre, où les morts ont froid, mais où tous les Africains rêvent d'aller un jour. (Effa, *Je la voulais lointaine* 45)

Dans *Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse* (2015), Gaston-Paul Effa puise dans le genre des biographies imaginaires de personnages réels, où la documentation s'allie à l'intuition créatrice. Publié dans la collection "Continents noirs" que Jean-Noël Schifano dirige chez Gallimard depuis 1999<sup>2</sup>, ce roman offre un exemple de ce que j'ai explicité en ouverture, car il déploie le thème de l'exil de manière inédite, lui conférant une dimension exceptionnelle et solitaire, chargée de puissante mélancolie, voire de désespoir. En fait, le destin tragique du héros est emblématique de celui du peuple africain, arraché de son continent dans des bateaux-négriers, victime de l'esclavage et de la colonisation. Raphaël Élizé – un héros de la France républicaine dont Gaston-Paul Effa retrace l'aventure personnelle en mêlant la notation de vie à la fiction – a dû fuir son pays, la Martinique, à la suite de l'éruption de la montagne Pelée<sup>3</sup>, et termine sa vie dans le mouvoir concentrationnaire mis en place par le Nazis à

Buchenwald. Toutefois, sa mémoire ne se prévaut pas de la solidarité et de la commisération accordées après l'holocauste aux membres de la diaspora juive, sans doute parce qu'il était noir<sup>4</sup>. En ce sens, le roman de Gaston-Paul Effa a le double mérite de prendre en compte un sujet négligé – les déportés noirs dans les camps de la mort allemands – et de vivifier à travers la fiction l'histoire d'un personnage antillais d'exception en mettant en jeu mémoire noire et mémoire juive, esclavage, colonisation et holocauste<sup>5</sup>.

Petit-fils d'esclave, Raphaël Élizé (1891-1945) était né en Martinique, avait étudié à Lyon où il avait choisi la profession vétérinaire gagnant peu à peu la confiance de la population de cette zone rurale et conservatrice à la fin des années vingt, jusqu'à parvenir à la guider, devenant le premier maire métis de la commune métropolitaine de Sablé-sur-Sarthe. Il collabore à la SFIO, le parti socialiste dans les années 30 en France; toutefois, en tant que noir, il est démis de ses fonctions en 1940, à la suite de l'occupation allemande: entré dans un réseau de résistants, il est arrêté et emprisonné à l'automne 1943 par les Nazis qui le condamnent à être interné à Buchenwald car "Il est insupportable à l'administration militaire et à l'armée allemande de reconnaître comme maire en territoire occupé un homme de couleur, ni de discuter avec lui." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 35)<sup>6</sup>. Le récit raconte sa déréliction pendant sa captivité jusqu'à sa mort, survenue le 9 février 1945 à la suite des bombardements des Alliés sur l'usine d'armement allemande dans laquelle il travaillait, à la veille de la libération des camps.

La particularité de ce roman réside à mon sens dans sa narration en miroir qui entrecroise de manière puissante des moments charnières de la biographie d'Élizé, même lointains dans le temps, avec quelques jalons de l'histoire de l'humanité. Ainsi ceux de la domination et de l'exploitation des noirs par les européens pendant l'esclavage et la colonisation – avec le corollaire non négligeable de leur participation à la première guerre mondiale dans l'infanterie coloniale – se nouent-ils, sans solution de continuité, avec ceux de la déportation des juifs et des noirs dans les camps d'extermination nazis. Et encore, les aspects socio-politiques de ces événements – où tout se joue dans et par la domination de l'un sur l'autre – consentent à l'auteur de créer un autre parallèle – juxtaposant des événements situés loin dans le temps – entre la relation de force en contexte dominé entre les hommes et celle entre l'homme et les animaux. Cette dernière, brillamment représentée, est cruciale dans ce

roman: étant vétérinaire, le héros connaît bien les animaux et les aborde avec une sensibilité tout à fait particulière, qui lui vient de la spiritualité transmise par ses ancêtres africains.

Je me propose donc d'analyser la narration, en insistant sur les 'reflets en miroir' créés par ces parallélismes, et d'en mettre en lumière des aspects inattendus, tant dans l'évocation historique des événements que dans leur interprétation à travers la pensée et la sensibilité humaniste et animiste du héros. L'évocation du camp de Buchenwald manque peut-être parfois de justesse, mais quel défi que de témoigner à la première personne, comme si c'était un journal, l'histoire de cet homme qui, après être entré dans la Résistance, est trahi par un collabo et interné à Buchenwald où il meurt, juste à la veille de la libération! Effets de réel à part, l'écriture relie les différents éléments de l'histoire, en créant des effets de télescopage intéressants, que j'examinerai en laissant de côté la perspective écocritique, pourtant fort intéressante, pour privilégier le message politique et littéraire que Gaston-Paul Effa nous transmet dans cette œuvre de fiction qui, en ce sens, appartient à la nouvelle littérature engageante, fondée sur le devoir de mémoire (Cazenave; Célerier 137-8). En choisissant le personnage historique d'Élizé, l'écrivain nous met en contact avec l'histoire douloureuse de son continent d'origine dont il partage la détresse des exilés, pour que nous n'oublions pas que cette époque-là est encore une blessure.

### 1. Une écriture de témoignage

La représentation des séquelles de la colonisation et des difficultés des exilés noirs en France, même de ceux dotés d'une forte volonté assimilationniste, peut se vanter d'une tradition littéraire bien établie dans les romans francophones. Et le lecteur avisé perçoit avec aisance les références intertextuelles sous-tendues dans ce roman, qui plongent dans les origines de la littérature africaine 'classique'. *Batouala, véritable roman nègre* de René Maran (1921) et "Et Caetera" (Damas, *Pigments*) – où le poète guyanais évoque le sacrifice des tirailleurs dans un cri à vif incitant les combattants à "commencer par envahir le Sénégal [et à] foutre aux Boches la paix"<sup>7</sup> – partagent avec le roman de Gaston-Paul Effa la volonté d'une écriture dressée contre la hantise de l'oubli (Huysen, *La hantise*). En fait, l'auteur a voulu remémorer l'aventure personnelle de Raphaël Élizé, déployant un angle de perspective moins connu sur la shoah: celui de la

déportation des noirs, sans oublier la déchéance de l'esclavage et de la colonisation.

*Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse* appartient donc à la catégorie du roman transmémoriel selon la définition de Nicole Lapierre<sup>8</sup> (Lapierre, *Cause commune* 207), tout comme les œuvres d'André et Simone Schwartz-Bart, *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967) et *La Mulâtresse solitude*<sup>9</sup> (1972), où la création s'appuie sur des résonances, tissant des liens entre Juifs et Noirs à différentes époques (Mollon, *Rendez-vous*). De même, dans le roman d'Effa, le lecteur avisé ne manque pas d'entendre les échos de la pensée du militant anticolonialiste martiniquais Frantz Fanon auquel l'écrivain a emprunté l'analyse lucide de deux catastrophes majeures pour les Noirs: la colonisation et les Indépendances (Fanon, *Peau noire*). Et l'on sent chez Élizé le même scandale démystificateur lorsqu'il analyse les réactions des habitants de la commune où il s'est installé et ses sentiments face à eux (Mollon, *Rendez-vous*). De nombreux paragraphes sont consacrés aux événements de sa vie de vétérinaire, à sa lente conquête de clients parmi les paysans, les éleveurs et les dames de la bonne société de Sablé-sur-Sarthe avec son esprit intrépide d'analyse et ses habiletés professionnelles.

La forme d'écriture choisie, le journal à la première personne, rédigé à partir de l'arrestation de son rédacteur, place le lecteur en prise directe avec les événements. En ce sens, le choix du héros, petit-fils d'esclave et colonisé, qui a servi la France militairement, en tant que tirailleur, et par la suite politiquement, à la tête de sa ville, me semble significative: il est le premier maire de la France de l'ouest à ouvrir une piscine publique et il crée une maternité après avoir vu mourir plus d'une femme en couche comme des bêtes<sup>10</sup>, sans pouvoir les sauver.

*Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse* se lit donc comme une œuvre de fiction dotée d'une charge historique et mémorielle importante, je dirais même salutaire en ces temps de crispations identitaires (Mollon, *Rendez-vous*). Cela explique sans doute la présence de quelques traits plus nettement pédagogiques qui affleurent ici et là dans la narration, à partir de l'avertissement goethéen suggérant de prêter attention aux animaux car "ils nous en apprennent davantage sur l'humain" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 9) et de l'inscription du roman sous l'égide de la pitié créatrice selon Stefan Zweig, une pitié non sentimentale qui persévère "jusqu'à l'extrême limite des forces humaines." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 11). Les deux citations en exergue révèlent le rôle phare assigné par le roman à l'Europe – et à l'Allemagne

en particulier – dans le domaine des sciences humaines, créant un effet de contraste avec les thèmes abordés par la narration.

Le journal de Raphaël Elizé est un expédient fictionnel<sup>11</sup> et il a été rédigé à partir d'un travail documentaire et de témoignages. L'expédient, peu vraisemblable, est un morceau de papier que le prisonnier aurait saisi dans le wagon qui le conduisait à Buchenwald, en créant ainsi l'effet d'un manuscrit trouvé, le récit intermittent d'un emprisonnement voué à la mort: "Mon voisin arrachait un bout de papier qui calfeutrait la fenêtre pour le glisser discrètement dans sa poche. Je ne savais trop ce qu'il allait en faire mais machinalement, sans y réfléchir, je l'imitai." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 28).

Le récit du voyage et de l'expérience de la détention dans le camp est intercalé avec celui de la longue conquête de la "bienveillance attentive" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 20) des habitants de Sablé-sur-Sarthe à l'égard du héros qui la recherche pour se sentir accueilli comme vétérinaire dans la commune où il a choisi de vivre. Absente au début de sa vie professionnelle, cette bienveillance sera acquise par Elizé au prix d'un travail de fidélisation, de soumission aux règles de la tribu sarthoise et de fortune que le héros résume dans la formule "rendez-vous avec le temps qui terrasse" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 19), créant ainsi un lien avec "l'heure qui blesse" mentionnée dans le titre. Une fois conquise, la bienveillance des gens de la commune sarthoise lui accorde un statut de prestige qu'il conserve jusqu'au déferlement de la vague nazie: "on ne demeure pas éternellement dans le camp des soumis, des esclaves, des dépourvus, j'étais un notable, un homme reconnu et respecté. Il m'était impossible d'imaginer un instant de retourner en arrière." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 40).

Toute une symbolique des objets est convoquée comme pierre de touche du rapport entre le vétérinaire noir et les habitants de la commune et pour dresser le portrait du héros en martyr: plus l'accueil est difficile et acrimonieux, plus les instruments donnés au vétérinaire pour ses ablutions sont miteux: de la "serpillère d'une propreté douteuse à la serviette rêche" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 61), jusqu'à une toile de jute qu'Elizé utilise après s'être lavé à l'eau d'une "cuvette rouillée" avec un savon dur comme la pierre que l'éleveur lui avait donnés, malgré la réussite du vélage auquel il venait d'assister. Se retrouvant les mains et le torse couverts de poussière, il comprend que la toile avait servi de sac pour les pommes de terre: "C'était partout et chaque fois la même chose. Le même rituel. Les mêmes signes. Les mêmes figures. Une bienfaisante répétition rassurait les cœurs et les confirmait dans leur méfiance." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 62).

Dans *Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse*, l'incipit et l'explicit sont particulièrement significatifs, s'agissant d'un récit de témoignage, quoique fictionnel. Le premier annonce efficacement, à travers les constellations, la double appartenance du héros: à l'hémisphère nord, où brillent la Grande Ourse et la Petite, et à l'Hémisphère sud d'où l'on aperçoit la constellation d'Orion et celle du Centaure, cette dernière visible de l'Équateur. Les bornes chronologiques – "tout aura commencé cet automne 1943" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 13) – correspondent au moment où le héros est arrêté par la Gestapo dans sa maison à Sablé-sur-Sarthe. Le lecteur comprend d'emblée qu'Élizé est un membre de la Résistance car, ayant été découvert, il a juste le temps de glisser à l'oreille de son neveu "qu'il faut déplacer Rebecca"<sup>12</sup> (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 11), avant de se sentir envahi par l'anéantissement et le sentiment qu'un nouvel exil allait commencer pour lui.

L'interrogatoire par les agents allemands offre au héros l'occasion de se présenter au lecteur: "Je m'appelle Raphaël Élizé, je suis né en Martinique, citoyen français, j'ai été le maire de cette petite commune..." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 11). C'est le premier de 65 courts chapitres qui scandent l'histoire du personnage de son arrestation jusqu'à la date liminaire du dernier chapitre: 9 février 1945, la veille de la libération des camps et le jour de la mort du héros. L'écriture rend jusque dans les derniers instants la vie d'Élizé qui, sous-alimenté et en très mauvais état de santé, périt des blessures causées par les bombardements des Alliés. Si ce choix de témoigner jusqu'à la fin est sans doute peu vraisemblable, il contribue à faire sentir au lecteur l'approche d'une mort qui réduit à néant les gestes les plus significatifs de la vie du héros, lui donnant la sensation:

que tous ces efforts, tous ces efforts crispés, faits par mes ancêtres, par moi-même en entrant en résistance, pour en finir avec l'esclavage, n'avaient servi de rien: je n'ai pas sauvé Janine [sa fille], je ne me suis pas sauvé, je n'ai pas sauvé la France, tous les miens, ou si mal? Le terrain était resté miné, et comment quelque chose aurait-il tenu, de tout ce que je m'épuisais à bâtir? (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 192)

Tous ces événements reconstruits de la biographie du vétérinaire martiniquais ne sont pas seulement mis en relation l'un avec l'autre, mais le narrateur les pose sur un même et unique plan où se jouxtent esclavage, colonisation et oppression nazie, leur conférant une valeur historique similaire.

La narration de Raphaël Élizé s'articule autour de plusieurs plans temporels: le présent de l'arrestation, de l'emprisonnement, du voyage vers le camp et les longs mois de détention; le passé de l'enfance vécue en Martinique et de l'histoire des ascendants et celui des événements de jeunesse du héros, ses études à la faculté vétérinaire de Lyon, les débuts de sa profession, l'établissement à Sablé-sur-Sarthe, la famille, le travail et les difficultés à s'affirmer parmi les éleveurs de la commune. Et le récit procède sans respecter l'ordre chronologique, chaque chapitre relatant un événement, souvent en relation avec son travail avec les animaux, avec les événements de sa vie personnelle en France et enfin avec son arrestation, son voyage dans le convoi allemand et son internement à Buchenwald. Dans chaque milieu, la solitude semble être le lot de Raphaël Élizé: seul lorsqu'il défendait la France en tant que tirailleurs lors de la Grande Guerre, seul parmi les habitants de Sablé-sur-Sarthe et encore plus seul dans le camp où il se sent différent des Juifs, des Chrétiens et des Polonais. Ces plans narratifs et temporels distincts sont destinés à s'entrecroiser tout au long du roman en créant des reprises en écho qui confèrent un surcroît de sens au récit des événements.

## 2. *Une narration en miroir*

Le réseau de correspondances qui se tisse, au delà du temps de l'écriture, met en valeur les moments charnières des aventures du héros et les relie avec ceux de l'Histoire, en sorte qu'ils se reflètent l'un dans l'autre, comme dans un jeu de miroir en cascade, gagnant en efficacité à chaque reprise. C'est ainsi que, par exemple, l'insomnie qui trouble le héros pendant son emprisonnement à Compiègne – station intermédiaire entre son arrestation et le départ pour les camps d'extermination en Allemagne – lui rappelle les angoisses éprouvées, “en août de la Grande Guerre, lorsque j'avais rejoint le 36<sup>e</sup> régiment d'infanterie coloniale” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 15-6). En effet, cet écho narratif accentue un des thèmes récurrents dans *Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse*: l'effolement face à la précarité du destin qui se combine avec les difficultés d'Élizé à réagir avec résilience aux traumatismes infligés par le camp. Et au narrateur de souligner que ce sentiment effraie non seulement les prisonniers, mais qu'il infecte aussi bien les soldats allemands qui “dans [l]e wagon soupçonnaient cruellement leur propre précarité, redoutaient par le seul



spectacle d'une angoisse qui pue, d'être corrodés, contaminés eux-mêmes." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 33).

Le silence, l'absence de communication – notamment celui entre les SS et les détenus – est un autre élément essentiel mis en lumière dans le roman à plusieurs reprises et qui acquiert un sens important grâce à cette construction narrative en rappels. Lors du premier voyage du héros en chemin de fer après l'arrestation, "les souvenirs [...] refluaient comme s'ils voulaient me transmettre un message que je ne saisisais pas encore." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 22). Et son sentiment de solitude se double du souvenir de celui qu'il avait éprouvé dans les premiers temps de sa profession à Sablé-sur-Sarthe, lorsque les éleveurs ne daignaient pas se montrer alors qu'Élizé soignait leurs animaux souffrants. Et par cet effet d'enchâssement, les temps se superposent créant des courts circuits de signification pour ériger le personnage en victime d'une histoire qui dépasse son aventure existentielle. Le souvenir d'un épisode de violence et de mort pendant un vèlage dramatique (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 23-4) – Elizé devra utiliser une scie mécanique pour dépecer un veau vivant dans l'utérus de la vache pour lui sauver la vie car il ne passerait jamais à travers son bassin, avec le veau qui gémit et agonise pendant cette opération qui s'avère particulièrement compliquée et brutale – fait fonction de présage des interrogatoires allemands du chapitre suivant (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 25-6), où de tels instruments sont utilisés pour mutiler les prisonniers réticents: "Je refusai d'imaginer ce qui se passait dans la pièce à côté, mais tout mon corps l'imaginait [...] j'avais la certitude qu'on coupait une main." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 25)

Plus tard, dans le train, il aperçoit une femme haletante qui entoure de ses mains son ventre rond et dont l'accouchement précoce ne peut que se terminer en fausse couche. Ne pouvant rien pour elle, il lui tient la main. L'accablement de cette femme lui rappelle celui d'une autre parturiente, douze ans plus tôt, dont le "regard désespéré allait bouleverser ma vie." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 30) En effet, à cause de l'absence de maternité dans la commune, le vétérinaire l'assiste lors de son accouchement. Cet épisode marquera le début de la mission politique d'Élizé qui s'engagera pour obtenir une maternité et améliorer ainsi les conditions de vie de ses concitoyens.

De poignants échos s'établissent dans le roman entre hommes et animaux sous le signe de la compassion: les wagons en direction des

camps, débordant de prisonniers, rappellent à Elizé les fourgons à bestiaux qu'il connaît bien; lors d'une halte du train des paysans, réquisitionnés par l'occupant, sont chargés d'étaler de la paille au sol du wagon, qui "suintait de pisse humaine et d'excréments." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 47) Et ils s'exécutaient le plus dignement possible, car ils étaient conscients que c'était le seul geste réconfortant qui leur était permis. Ce mélange de sympathie et d'impuissance est le même que celui que le héros avait éprouvé quand les services vétérinaires l'avaient convoqué pour réquisitionner les vaches d'une ferme destinées à l'abattoir (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 47-8). Ou encore, Élizé se souvient de son premier client à Sablé-sur-Sarthe, M. Pottier, car la blancheur de ses cheveux est semblable à celle d'un prisonnier qui agonise dans une souffrance ininterrompue dans la même chambrée que le narrateur. Impuissant à le soulager, il se souvient de la décision de M. Pottier d'abattre son chien, décision charitable, au vu de ses conditions. Seule la compassion reste à Elizé qui avoue: "J'aurais voulu pouvoir le soulager comme j'aurais soulagé un chien." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 70)

Parfois l'effet-miroir dans la narration s'établit par contraste: la puanteur suffocante se répandant dans le camp et suffocant toute mémoire olfactive est comparée "à l'ultime avatar d'un cri d'homme" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 66) et rappelle au narrateur, par contraste, "l'odeur de Caroline [sa femme], une odeur douce et ambrée, comme les fleurs douces de gardénia" une nuit d'amour où il avait été appelé pour une urgence charriant dans la ferme "le lit de fleurs" qu'il venait de quitter (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 66-7).

Maints épisodes qu'Élizé raconte dans le journal sont ramenés aux événements saillants de sa vie précédente: sa conscience d'être noir, d'être un rejeton de l'esclavage, le rescapé d'une catastrophe naturelle (l'éruption du volcan Pelée), enfin tout contribue à faire du héros un témoin d'exception, et non seulement des camps. Mais de même sont évoquées les premières expériences de vétérinaire, la réticence des fermiers et leur surprise face à la professionnalité de ce martiniquais fier et modeste, de sa première visite – "Un jour, le téléphone avait sonné" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 18) – à sa bonne réputation qui commence à se répandre dans la région.

Le camp de Buchenwald est représenté comme un bateau négrier, où la révolte est dans les attitudes, puisque toute action est impossible (King, *Gaston-Paul Effa* 60); Élizé a son matricule tatoué, 40490, comme les bêtes qu'il soignait ou, plus loin dans le temps, déshumanisé comme "...les esclaves dans les cales de bateau" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 88). Et c'est

dans l'appréhension de sa condition de détenu qu'il fera un rêve érotique, où il imagine étreindre la montagne Pelée, celle de la terrible éruption qui a causé son départ de la Martinique, comme si c'était un sein, retrouvant enfin ses propres racines.

Et les images, telles que le personnage les voit et nous les raconte, "sont là, saugrenues [...] accourues de partout [...] surimprimées qu'elles sont, comme collées sur le tableau du monde" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 27). Elles mettent en relation différentes époques, créant des allers-retours entre le passé autobiographique et historique et le temps présent du journal. Si ces courts-circuits n'enlèvent sans doute pas un arrière-goût d'artifice au roman (Harzoune, *Rendez-vous*), les passages d'un lieu à l'autre sont souvent sans solution de continuité et contiennent des moments lyriques à la prose lumineuse qui élargissent la condition d'Élizé: "Mon grand-père disait que pour les Noirs la peau est un mystère insondable [...] ce qu'il voulait dire mon grand-père, c'était peut-être que la peau d'autrui et sans doute la sienne et aussi la mienne d'aujourd'hui, sont un détroit où l'on ne peut que se perdre." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 17-8)

Les poncifs sur les noirs qui circulaient à l'époque en France, confondant l'Afrique avec la Martinique et pensant aux colonies comme à des landes désolées sans moyens d'instruction (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 57-8), ne sont rien comparés au traitement qu'Élizé subit dans le camp en tant que prisonnier noir. Si le roman d'Effa met "dos à dos les mémoires noire et juive" (Gyssels, *Rendez-vous*), montrant combien d'affinités les juifs ont avec les noirs sous la perspective de l'oppression et de la domination, il révèle aussi la condition d'infériorité transhistorique du noir qui dépasse largement celle du juif.

Lorsque *Lagerältester* le choisit pour assister au premier rang à l'exécution de deux prisonniers qui ont tenté l'évasion, il l'interpelle en ces termes: "«Toi le nègre, regarde comment on traite le gibier.» J'entendais: "Toi l'animal, quoi que tu fasses, le prochain c'est toi."»" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 72) Cette première appellation qui suscite la perplexité du narrateur est suivie d'un autre épisode qui ne laisse plus aucun doute sur le système social du camp et sur la considération que les nazis avaient des noirs. Un jour, le narrateur répond à l'appel destiné aux juifs considérant qu'à force d'entendre ce mot il se considérait comme un juif: "Nous étions tous juifs, c'était naturel," alors qu'il reçoit un coup à la tête accompagné de

l'exclamation: "“J’ai dit juif tu es un nègre, dégage!” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 75) qui le rabat à sa condition d’infériorité consubstantielle: “Voilà ce que j’étais. J’étais moins que juif, si cela est pensable!” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 73). Et cela laisse place au scandale, car le verdict est clair: il est “un détail du détail de l’histoire, un cafard, rien du tout” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 78), ce qui le jette dans une prostration jusque-là inconnue. Mais cela est aussi le début d’une libération de cette attitude rationnelle qu’il avait conservée jusqu’alors pour ne pas se sentir un corps étranger dans la société de son temps.

Alors qu’il était convaincu que tous les prisonniers du camp étaient égaux face à l’horreur allemande, il constatera que l’échelle est bien plus variée, car “dans la hiérarchie nazie, plus bas que le Polonais, il y a le Juif, plus bas que le Juif, il y a le nègre.” En effet, le roman d’Effa souligne les similitudes dans le destin de ces deux peuples, on ne peut plus loin l’un de l’autre: le juif est par définition cultivé, intelligent et riche, l’africain, par contre, démuné et ignorant. Mais les deux tombent sous la férule de l’histoire et, comme l’affirme l’écrivain dans une interview, “la rencontre de ces deux êtres symboliques était tellement improbable qu’il fallait en faire un roman.” (Mollon; Effa, *Gaston-Paul Effa*)

L’appel inexorable “*Neger! Neger!*” accompagné d’un coup de schlog (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 71) qui scande la distribution de la soupe, lorsque la tâche échoit à Elizé, fait ressurgir dans l’esprit du vétérinaire une vague d’incertitude sur son identité qui remonte dans les siècles, acquérant une dimension transhistorique: “Comme disait mon père et avant lui mon grand-père, je n’étais pas assez convaincu de ma propre existence après des siècles d’esclavage pour, dans l’instant, et malgré la terreur, me sentir être [...] où diable étais-je, dans cette incohérente succession de dépossessions?” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 71) Et tout d’un coup le héros comprend qu’il tient encore en lui l’angoisse de l’esclavage de ses ancêtres: “La crainte [...] ne m’avait jamais quitté, [...] me narguait, tapie dans le fond de l’œil de chacun de nos ancêtres immortalisés sur les portraits, et plus je les décryptais, plus la colère qu’elle déchaînait me poussait à travailler davantage [...] pour effacer à jamais dans [le] regard jusqu’au souvenir de l’esclavage.” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 105)

L’appréhension de sa condition de noir et de rejeton d’esclave comme une réalité historique ineffaçable, surtout en contexte concentrationnaire, confère au héros une conscience aiguë du manque de dessein de l’Histoire qui le pousse à imaginer sa vie comme une carte déployée “de sa

misérable origine à cette fin plus déchirante encore et plus déserte” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 52), jalonnée d’une haine et d’une rancune transhistoriques.

Pour représenter cette condition, le narrateur se prévaut encore une fois de la métaphore animale qui se révèle efficace. La réception d’un colis envoyé par sa femme et pillé par les soldats du camp, qui ne lui laissent que quelques cigarettes et un paquet de tabac, imprime une accélération soudaine dans la vie d’Élizé, provoquant une réaction instinctive de sa part. Il sent qu’il doit se montrer dominant comme font les bêtes entre elles, puisque “J’étais l’animal, j’avais rejoint malgré moi la cohorte de ceux à qui on refuse une âme” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 108), même si cela lui coûtera vingt-cinq coups de cravache.

Un autre épisode significatif est celui, d’ailleurs peu vraisemblable, de la rencontre entre Elizé et le chien d’Hitler, Blondi, le célèbre chouchou du dictateur. Forcé par les Nazis à s’en occuper, il se trouve dans l’inconfortable position de prendre soin d’un animal qui lui est supérieur. En le lavant, Elizé “se sent seul, perdu [...] une amère pitié de moi-même m’envahit et je regrettais presque un instant d’être vétérinaire [...] Je n’avais pris de vraie douche depuis plusieurs mois et je pouais plus que l’animal que je lavais. J’étais le chien. Le chien était moi. J’étais un animal qui s’occupait d’un autre.” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 140) Ici l’expérience de vétérinaire décuple l’horreur des camps et accentue le pathétisme victimaire du héros (Wodka blog).

Au fur et à mesure de sa détention dans le camp, il prend conscience qu’il est au plus bas de la hiérarchie lorsqu’il découvre avec stupeur que les Nazis ne ressentent même pas le besoin de l’éliminer. Les sévices perpétrés par l’ennemi le corroborent dans sa conviction que sa déchéance l’apparente aux animaux, dont il connaît bien la condition d’infériorité: “Ah! comme ils savaient bien, les Allemands, nous réduire à l’état de bêtes!” (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 33)

Cette association entre l’animal et l’homme ne manque pas de compassion: lorsque le narrateur décrit les gardes du camp censées surveiller les prisonniers et leurs vulgarités adressées aux internés, il commente d’un ton pathétique et non sans sympathie religieuse: “Oui ils le savaient bien, ils nous faisaient du mal, ils se réjouissaient même de nous en faire, de penser que ce mal, comme une infection, mettait en nous un germe qui grandirait, ferait de nous des *animaux*<sup>13</sup> qui, à force de souffrir, deviendraient eux-mêmes ces loques qu’ils se voyaient devenir.” (Effa,

*Rendez-vous 51)*

Les tortures humiliantes que les prisonniers subissent, la privation d'alimentation, de confort, unis à la fatigue minent aussi bien leur corps que leur moral. Et le narrateur commente cette déchéance inexorable en s'appuyant sur une partie anatomique en particulier:

En peu de jours nos pieds avaient été abîmés par le froid. Nous étions précipités dans la catégorie des êtres à qui tout était refusé, comme des moutons, des vaches ou des chevaux devant lesquels les portes se ferment, les visages rembrunissent et se détournent. Moi, fils d'esclave, condamné à marcher pieds nus, je découvrais que l'humiliation pouvait se trouver concentrée sur cette partie de l'être dépourvue d'expression. (Effa, *Rendez-vous 64*)

Les pieds sont la pierre de touche de cette déchéance: les orteils blessés, Élizé mesure "out le poids des non-dits dans la balance de l'esprit"; les pieds nus, Élizé est rendu à lui-même à sa condition ancestrale et bascule "tout entier dans la boue des jours." (Effa, *Rendez-vous 64*)

Si le narrateur vétérinaire se garde d'approcher l'indescriptible dans sa représentation des camps, si son récit est dépourvu des ressorts stylistiques efficaces pour évoquer le mal absolu, sa prose dessine avec acuité les conditions inégalitaires qu'il connaît bien: celle des animaux par rapport aux hommes et comment ces derniers se conduisent souvent en animaux et avec les hommes et avec les bêtes.

Confronté à cela, le héros fait preuve d'endurance et, lorsque la souffrance devient insupportable, il appelle ses ancêtres morts sous les cendres de la montagne Pelée qui détruisit la vieille de Saint-Pierre. Les éléments naturels de cette catastrophe sont semblables à la puissance allemande déferlant sur l'Europe. Raphaël se considère un résistant parce que sa lignée a survécu à la déportation de l'Afrique aux Antilles, à l'esclavage et aux catastrophes naturelles, lui conférant une stratégie de survie qui se révélera malheureusement perdante face aux événements de Buchenwald.

### *3. Le pouvoir de la littérature*

Le roman souligne les stratégies mises en acte par le héros pour survivre à la déchéance, aux harcèlements et à la solitude dans le camp. Parmi celles-ci figure le recours à la littérature et à la poésie sous différentes formes. En premier la création, en collaboration avec d'autres résistants, d'un journal qui permet au héros de sortir du cercle suffocant de l'écriture intime. Cette publication clandestine destinée aux prisonniers du camp résorbe par l'ironie la volonté de vengeance des détenus et montre à quel point la parole écrite constituent le dernier rempart contre la déréliction et l'anéantissement. Le journal, des poèmes appris par cœur et retranscrits à côté des caricatures et des croquis, devient un "dérivatif" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 133), un repoussoir à la violence du camp. En fait, sur la question de l'écriture en tant que rempart contre l'absurdité de sa condition de prisonnier, Élizé s'était déjà interrogé quand il avait commencé à rédiger son journal, quand il avait ressenti le besoin de noter sur le bout de papier subtilisé dans le wagon, l'heure de son arrivée à Buchenwald:

Pourquoi, même d'écrire cela, je me sens, un instant, comme soulagé? Y a-t-il dans le simple fait d'écrire, un allègement provisoire, comme pour le coupable dans l'aveu, ou même, pour certains, dans le fait de parler, dans la confiance la plus désacralisée? Non pas l'écriture, mais le fait, presque tout matériel, d'écrire, de noter, non pas la catharsis, mais la plus banale, la plus vulgaire thérapeutique. (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 49)

La parole écrite – que ce soit celle du journal intime d'Élizé ou bien de la feuille composée avec les dissidents du camp – revêt une importance extraordinaire dans le roman, au point que le héros affirme qu' "il me semblait que je ne pourrais plus exister que dans l'écriture" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 146) comme si à elle seule était confiée la tâche de témoigner pour donner un sens à l'absurdité vécue.

Gaston-Paul Effa puise ici dans une tradition bien établie: la réaction d'Élizé n'est pas sans rappeler celle de son célèbre prédécesseur Primo Levi, interné par les Nazis dans le camp d'Auschwitz. Dans un épisode très connu de son autobiographie concentrationnaire – *Se questo è un uomo* (1958) – l'écrivain italien déclame et traduit à la fois quelques vers du chant d'Ulysse de Dante à un compagnon français désireux d'apprendre l'italien. Mais en même temps il découvre des analogies entre l'épisode d'Ulysse paraphrasé à son ami et la situation historique et contingente qu'ils sont

en train de vivre, qui le pousse à réfléchir sur ce que l'homme peut infliger et ce qu'il peut subir, avec une description de l'abyme dans lequel il peut sombrer. De même, dans *Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse*, le narrateur affirme:

Nous récitions des tirades entières de Cervantès, Shakespeare, ou même Goethe, oubliant pour un temps les turpitudes de nos fonctions. [...] Les textes nous emportaient alors dans un jeu [...] et nous transformaient en Don Quichotte, Hamlet ou Faust [...] n'avaient-ils pas été créés pour prouver la dignité de l'être humain? (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 112-3).

Suivant une représentation devenue un *topos*, la défaite de la raison face à la barbarie est représentée par l'écoulement du bateau d'Ulysse dans la transposition que Primo Levi fait de la représentation dantesque du héros grec.

Pour le vétérinaire originaire de la Martinique, l'évocation de quelques poèmes de Baudelaire autrefois appris par cœur sont autant de bouées de sauvetage. Si Dieu apparaît lointain et qu'il est difficile pour le héros d'appréhender ce qui lui arrive à travers la religion, les vers de Rimbaud, de Baudelaire, de Mallarmé appris par cœur et répétés dans les moments les plus difficiles l'aident à tenir le coup. Ceux qui résonnent avec plus de force dans le journal d'Élizé sont extraits du sonnet *L'Ennemi* de Baudelaire où le poète affirme avoir touché "l'automne des idées" et où l'adversaire est le mal "obscur [...] / [...] qui nous ronge le cœur / Du sang que nous perdons croit et se fortifie!" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 96-7). Le narrateur établit donc à travers la poésie une analogie entre sa condition passée – "Ma jeunesse ne fut qu'un ténébreux orage / qu'il reste en mon jardin bien peu de fruits vermeils" – et présente – "Ô douleur! ô douleur! Le temps mange la vie!" –, pourvoyant le spleen baudelairien de son angoisse individuelle et historique.

#### 4. La mort et l'âme: en guise de conclusion

Avant les bombardements des alliés sur les camps, Élizé est affecté à l'usine d'armement où le travail était particulièrement rude: son épuisement atteint son comble, charriant avec lui des éclats de folie. Dans ces accès, le spectre qu'il est devenu et qu'il a pu apercevoir fugitivement dans le reflet d'une



fenêtre prend ses souvenirs pour la réalité (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 121-2).

Le choix de l'auteur de terminer son œuvre par la représentation d'Élizé, qui se décrit mourant dans les dernières pages de son journal, est invraisemblable mais non dépourvu de poésie. Blessé pendant une attaque aérienne, atteint par la matérialité de la douleur, Élizé transfigure la réalité et y décèle, suivant une pensée spirituelle, même animiste, une signification cachée capable de lui donner finalement un sens. À la fusion entre l'homme et la bête que certaines analogies avaient bien mis en lumière dans les chapitres précédents, succède, dans l'*explicit*, la description lucide d'une dimension autre, le héros ayant rompu "toute attache avec la terre" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 195) et savourant la "joie de l'instant" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 195) du dernier sacrifice, vivant et écrivant en même temps son martyrologe. Récitant "la formule sacramentelle, ceci est mon corps, ceci est le nègre, bon Dieu qu'il nous tuent tous et que la terre soit débarrassée de ces sauvages..." (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 195), Élizé s'offre en tant que persécuté capital – rôle quelque peu abusé – en passe de délivrer l'humanité du mal. Son immolation laisse toutefois en suspens "les anciens pourquoi, toujours renouvelés," l'esclavage, la colonisation et les camps, mais elle ne tarit pas le sentiment de révolte "contre l'incohérent destin qui abolit / Ce qu'il acheminait vers l'accomplissement (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 195).

Raphaël Élizé s'inscrit ainsi dans la lignée de ses ancêtres, dont il ne se sentait pas à la hauteur, ayant perdu "le gène de la résignation" (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 26), la résilience produite par les bannissements successifs de l'Histoire.

Au plus profond même de la déchéance, il se sent habité par un feu latent qui ne disparaîtra jamais (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 56). Et ce n'est qu'en vertu de cette référence constante à une dimension ultérieure qu'il peut décrire et représenter le camp et sa propre mort.

Par son tissage subtil de mémoires douloureuses, le roman de Gaston-Paul Effa renverse la doxa du statut victimaire accordé aux seuls juifs dans l'univers concentrationnaire, en rapprochant deux mémoires collectives – hébraïque et noire – historiquement complexes. Même si parfois son écriture apparaît désincarnée et ampoulée, *Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse* a le mérite d'avoir reconstruit par la fiction la biographie d'un personnage emblématique pour la France et représenté un événement de l'histoire plutôt ignoré – le sort des noirs dans les camps – et, de l'autre, d'avoir affronté les thèmes les plus épineux de l'histoire de la civilisation occidentale en les posant sur un même plan, conférant au *Neger* le sceau

de martyr universel et une forme de rédemption qui puise dans l'animisme:  
"Si tu regardes, tu finiras par voir. Ta vie alors s'allégera et deviendra aussi  
douce que la lumière" (Effa, *Le Dieu* 174).



- 1 Il est aussi bien professeur de philosophie en Lorraine, à Strasbourg.
- 2 Cette collection, qui vante parmi ses auteurs Théo Ananissoh, Natacha Appanah, Mongo Beti, Florent Couao-Zotti, Ananda Devi, Fabienne Kanor, Koffi Kwahulé, Scholastique Mukasonga Mamadou Mahmoud N'Dongo, Sani Tchak et Abdourahman A. Waberi, se propose de fournir au lecteur une représentation de la multiplicité des écritures littéraires de l'exil africain.
- 3 Ce volcan, surplombant la ville de Saint-Pierre en Martinique, est connu pour son éruption de 1902 qui a provoqué la destruction de la ville tout entière. Cette catastrophe est la toile de fond du dernier roman de Gaston-Paul Effa, *Le miraculé de Saint-Pierre* (2017) qui retrace le destin du seul survivant, en jetant une lumière nouvelle sur l'histoire des opprimés de l'Afrique et des Caraïbes.
- 4 Conversation personnelle avec l'auteur lors de sa venue à Naples, le 26 mars 2018, à l'occasion d'une rencontre avec les écrivains de la collection «Continents noirs» – Théo Ananissoh, Gaston-Paul Effa et Mamadou Mahmoud N'Dongo – dans le cadre de la 23<sup>e</sup> semaine de langue française et de la francophonie. Cette manifestation a été organisée en collaboration avec l'Institut Français.
- 5 La question intéresse depuis longtemps l'auteur qui, en 2003, publie avec André Chouraqui un dialogue qui est un regard croisé sur leurs histoires personnelles et celles des relations entre le peuple juif et le peuple noir, prônant une nouvelle tolérance (Chouraqui; Effa, *Le livre de l'Alliance*).
- 6 Un documentaire de Philippe Baron, *Le métis de la République*, sorti en 2013, retrace la vie de Raphaël Élizé à travers des témoignages personnels et des documents historiques. Dans une lettre ouverte publiée dans «Le Nouvel Observateur» le 26 mars 2015, le documentariste accuse Effa de plagiat, d'avoir tordu la réalité historique pour faire de Raphaël Élizé, brillant exemple de la France républicaine, un martyr. L'écrivain, loin d'alimenter la polémique, a revendiqué son allégorisation du personnage et le côté fictionnel de sa reconstruction littéraire.
- 7 30.000 soldats noirs ont été déployés par l'armée française pour combattre en Europe, entre 1914-18, une guerre qui n'était pas la leur. Senghor aussi avait inauguré son recueil *Hosties noires* (1964) par un poème évoquant le

- massacre de Tyaroye (1944) et qui se voulait une réplique mitigée au poème-invective de Damas.
- 8 Nicole Lapiere (*Causes communes*) explore les moments de fraternité durable qui ont uni Juifs et Noirs des deux côtés de l'Atlantique suivant le principe selon lequel l'identité meurtrie ne peut se reconnaître que dans le miroir d'un autre dont l'identité est aussi blessée.
  - 9 La Mûlatresse solitude est un personnage historique de la résistance des esclaves noirs de la Guadeloupe et le roman d'André Schwarz-Bart en retrace l'histoire.
  - 10 Le thème du vèlage réapparaît fréquemment dans le roman, se configurant comme un *topos*.
  - 11 Raphaël Élizé avait tenu une correspondance avec sa femme de Buchenwald, comme l'affirme le réalisateur Philippe Baron (2015).
  - 12 Comme on le comprendra plus tard, Rebecca était le nom en code d'un poste émetteur (Effa, *Rendez-vous* 55).
  - 13 C'est moi qui souligne.



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# Évolution éditoriale et réception décalée en Algérie. Le cas de la production algérienne de langue française récente

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*Evolution morphologique du champ éditorial littéraire en Algérie  
et positionnements des écrivains*

Nous nous pencherons dans cette étude sur les œuvres et les écrivains algériens de langue française par rapport à l'édition et à la réception littéraires en Algérie durant ces dernières années. Même si nous ne manquerons pas de signaler par moment les interférences qui existent avec l'espace littéraire français<sup>1</sup>. Le propos ici est de signaler certaines des tendances générales de l'activité littéraire de langue française en Algérie qui demandent à être confirmées et surtout détaillées dans leurs différentes dimensions (thématiques et styles d'écriture, positionnements des écrivains, variations éditoriales et réceptions critiques journalistiques et universitaires). Il vise à offrir une relative actualisation de la documentation sur la vie littéraire de langue française récente en Algérie et signaler quelques-uns des enjeux internes à l'espace littéraire qui s'y jouent<sup>2</sup>.

Si certains écrivains et leurs œuvres sont marqués par la bipolarisation relative des horizons d'attente entre la France et l'Algérie, la question du champ littéraire algérien de langue française est toujours aussi problématique du fait de ses rapports complexes avec le champ littéraire français depuis ses origines à nos jours. Au plan historique, tout d'abord, avec l'émergence d'écrivains autochtones musulmans durant la période coloniale et des relations qui se sont instaurées après l'indépendance de l'Algérie en 1962. D'autre part cela se manifeste diversement à travers les

parcours des écrivains, les expériences éditoriales et la réception médiatique et universitaire française des œuvres littéraires algériennes<sup>3</sup>.

Une certaine polarisation éditoriale commence à se dessiner en Algérie depuis au moins une décennie à l'image du système français<sup>4</sup>. Des éditeurs-distributeurs s'imposent autant par leur taille que par leur diversification éditoriale (Casbah éditions, Chihab éditions, Alpha, Dar Othmania, etc.). Ils cumulent souvent avec l'édition, l'impression, la possession de librairies (surtout à Alger), d'une fonction de distributeur (cas de Chihab ou Dar Othmania). La production littéraire qu'ils promeuvent varie entre auteurs reconnus (Yasmina Khadra, Anouar Benmalek, etc.) et découvertes. Des éditeurs davantage axés sur la littérature comme Barzakh, APIC, Hibr mettent en œuvre une sorte de 'politique des auteurs' et le développement de la co-édition à l'étranger (notamment en France), bien qu'il s'agisse dans les faits d'achats de droits restreints à la vente sur le territoire algérien. Les éditions du secteur public (l'ENAG ou l'ANEP principalement) réservent une part significative dans leur catalogue à la fiction littéraire alors que des éditeurs 'régionaux,' Média-Plus à Constantine ou Dar El Gharb à Oran éditent principalement des auteurs locaux. Il faut signaler le cas d'éditeurs régionaux au départ, voire militants comme les éditions Frantz-Fanon qui s'ouvrent à la littérature et aux auteurs établis (Rachid Boudjedra)<sup>5</sup>. La production de livres (tous genres et langues confondues) est estimée pour les cinq dernières années entre 3000 et 3500 titres par année en Algérie avec un tirage moyen de 1000 exemplaires pour les romans, 1500 à 2000 pour les livres d'histoire, 5000 à 7000 exemplaires pour les livres jeunesse. Elle aurait tendance à diminuer en terme de volume selon les éditeurs (2018) en raison de l'augmentation des coûts de production des livres mais continue à progresser en nombre de titres (surtout en langue arabe).

Si la production littéraire en Algérie est assez variée dans ses dispositifs et ses intentions littéraires, les représentations des publics et de la critique développent, en particulier, ces dernières années, une vision quelque peu mythologisante des écrivains des années 50. C'est surtout une sorte de mélange de discours de valorisation de l'œuvre et de la personne de l'écrivain qui participe à une forme de canonisation littéraire. Leur essentialisation leur permet d'advenir comme écrivains du présent.

Il se formule ainsi, au travers des études et réceptions, une sorte d'hagiographie littéraire et une valorisation éthique où les icônes littéraires



sont davantage célébrées par rapport à leur engagement citoyen que par la prévalence de leur esthétique. Très souvent Kateb Yacine, Rachid Mimouni, AssiaDjebar, Tahar Djaout, Mouloud Mammeri, sont valorisés en tant que personnes au parcours exemplaire, au détriment de leur œuvre devenue prétexte accessoire pour illustrer l’accomplissement de leur personnalité<sup>6</sup>. On le retrouve dans les articles de presse et dans les travaux et essais universitaires publiés en Algérie. D’autre part, l’animation du champ littéraire national à travers les controverses, les polémiques et les contestations qui sont consubstantielles à l’activité littéraire est assez constante en Algérie. Elle relaie des événements politiques en certaines circonstances.

Dénombrant les partisans et les dissidents, la querelle polarise les échanges littéraires et peut constituer l’occasion d’une mise en scène de soi, comme écrivain ou non, au point où certains acteurs en viennent à se spécialiser dans l’imprécation et la polémique, à plus forte raison depuis qu’irradient sur le monde des lettres les commentaires de la presse et des autres médias qui ont contribué à l’exceptionnaliser. (Bertrand, Saint-Amand et Stiénon)

Le fait que les questions littéraires et celles qui impliquent les acteurs de cette production fassent l’objet de réactions qui débordent du domaine propre du champ est probablement l’une des caractéristiques du monde culturel au cours de ces dernières années. C’est ce que Jean-Michel Péru (48) a dénommé ‘l’appel au profane’: “On peut dénommer ‘appel au profane’ la démarche qui consiste à en appeler à une autorité extérieure au champ (et plus généralement à tout étranger au champ), autorité dont la légitimité est plus ou moins reconnue par certaines fractions du champ et dans certains états du champ, pour arbitrer certains conflits internes au champ.”

En Algérie ce type de manifestation se dédouble en conflits identitaires et positionnements politiques qui se situent dans un rapport complexe au roman national, aux conséquences sociales du développement de l’islam radical, à la violence terroriste et au passé colonial<sup>7</sup>. Si les domaines d’intervention et de réaction de la critique restent plus ou moins circonscrits à la sphère artistique concernée (et donc à l’ensemble des protagonistes qui s’y reconnaissent), en certaines circonstances, le critique se retrouve face à ce que j’appelle, génériquement, l’assignation publique: rumeur, intervention juridique ou politique et, aujourd’hui, plus emblématiques

et véhicules d'une grande audience, les réseaux sociaux comme critique d'intervention.

Au cours de sa polémique en 1992<sup>8</sup> contre Tahar Djaout et les universitaires francophones, Tahar Ouattar avait fait systématiquement usage de l'argumentaire politique pour dénoncer ses adversaires: "Ce que je voudrais que l'on sache, c'est qu'aujourd'hui, on ne va plus se permettre de se croiser les bras, et s'il faut la guerre, on va la faire" (*Algérie-Actualité*), puis plus radicalement: "Comme j'attire l'attention des autorités concernées par la défense de la souveraineté du pays et de sa sécurité sur la nécessité de s'occuper de certains établissements névralgiques où nidifient en toute liberté les cinquièmes colonnes." (*El Watan*)

Dans cette controverse où la question de la division, voire de l'opposition entre arabisants et francophones, paraissait à première vue fondamentale, ce sont, en fait, les termes mêmes de la valorisation littéraire, des conditions d'élargissement de la réception des œuvres, des mécanismes de la reconnaissance et de la hiérarchisation qui constituaient l'essentiel des critiques de Ouattar envers Djaout et les universitaires algériennes qui étaient impliquées (Christiane Achour et Najet Khadda). Cette donnée centrale reposait sur deux corps d'arguments que nous avons schématisés à travers le rapport *Peuple/écrivains francophones* comme catégorie de disqualification et l'appel à l'autorité et au contrôle idéologique de l'appareil d'Etat comme ultime ressource pour résoudre la contradiction propre au dysfonctionnement des instances nationales du champ littéraire.

La polémique, elle, est forcément plus collective et mobilise autour d'une idée ou d'une prise de position, souvent dans une dimension morale ou politique, les partisans et les adversaires d'une cause : elle semble elle aussi animée par l'objectif d'une résolution, en ce sens qu'elle constitue le vecteur d'une forme d'engagement, de combat, de lutte, comme le rappelle son étymologie (Bertrand, Saint-Amand et Stiénon).

Pour étayer la prise de position polémique, la stratégie argumentative s'appuyait essentiellement sur la revendication de l'autonomie de Ouattar (par rapport à l'Union des Ecrivains des années 70/80) et sur une affirmation répétitive de la qualité et de l'intégrité de sa production littéraire. A propos de l'Union des Ecrivains Algériens durant les années 70 Tahar Ouattar tente de démontrer que les écrivains algériens francophones avaient eu

des responsabilités importantes en son sein quand elle était entièrement contrôlée par le FLN: “Malek Haddad était secrétaire général de l’Union des Ecrivains Algériens quand le FLN était parti unique. Tahar Djaout et les autres essayaient les chaussures de Malek Haddad.” Et pour affirmer son indépendance en tant qu’écrivain, il ajoute, pour ce qui est de sa propre production littéraire: “Moi j’ai écrit ‘L’As,’ je l’ai édité en Algérie. J’ai écrit ‘Le pécheur et le palais’ et je l’ai édité à compte d’auteur. A cette époque eux, étaient chefs de rubrique, chefs de service dans les journaux d’Etat. Moi j’étais contrôleur d’Etat et Tahar Djaout mon garde champêtre.” (*El Watan*)

Paradoxalement, la question de la langue d’écriture n’était que secondaire dans le discours de Ouattar (même si le postulat de la langue arabe comme langue d’expression ‘naturelle’ du nationalisme y est constant). Ce sont en fait ses contradicteurs indirects (chroniqueurs et journalistes) qui vont tenter de justifier l’usage littéraire de la langue française en recourant aux clichés les plus datés (‘butin de guerre’ expression attribuée à Kateb Yacine) ou dans le fait qu’elle se trouve quasiment ‘nationalisée’ par l’insertion d’expressions et d’idiomes du langage quotidien des algériens. Les bonnes questions implicites que posait (avec une évidente mauvaise foi) Ouattar, sont loin d’avoir été vraiment discutés jusqu’ici.

L’animation littéraire a été marquée par quelques manifestes provocateurs et ironiques (*Chkoupisme*, Benfodil 2007, *Bezzef!-Assez!* de Daoud/Amari/Benfodil, Meddi en 2009 etc.) qui ont secoué de temps à autre le Landerneau littéraire algérien sans modifier profondément l’activité du champ. C’est ce que constatait avec philosophie et réalisme Habib Ayoub:

Tous les systèmes ont la capacité de retomber sur leurs pattes et récupérer les écrivains les plus téméraires. Mon dernier recueil de nouvelles, *L’homme qui n’existait pas*, est assez féroce mais on le trouve dans les meilleures librairies et à l’aéroport d’Alger. Cela devient une espèce d’alibi à la démocratie. Mais que voulez-vous que je fasse? M’arrêter d’écrire? Je ne le pense pas. (Ayoub)

Seules les assignations publiques et les plus dramatiques (affaire Kamel Daoud/ le prédicateur Chemsou, chaîne de TV Ennahar/ Rachid Boudjedra) ont contribué à mettre la littérature au cœur du débat social avec le risque de la réduire aux positionnements des auteurs. Enfin l’on peut voir poindre une recherche du succès éditorial à travers des dispositifs de publicisation plus prégnants de l’activité des écrivains.

## *Recompositions et reconfigurations éditoriales*

Le constat d'une production littéraire francophone régulière et en développement est un fait indéniable. Pourtant il faut noter que deux tiers de la production littéraire de langue française présente en Algérie sur le marché national est en auto-édition ou à compte d'auteur et peine à s'affirmer au milieu d'un lectorat francophone 'vieillissant'<sup>9</sup> et en déclin relatif. D'autre part, dans cet univers du livre, il y a très peu de circulation des ouvrages en dehors des principales grandes villes du pays en raison du faible taux de librairies (à peine 200 dont l'activité principale porte sur le commerce du livre). Et enfin, les recensions critiques, dans la presse et dans quelques émissions de radio et de télévision, sont rares et souvent orientées sur les cercles et réseaux d'affinités locales et nationales.

Ainsi, en dehors de la production littéraire en français éditée localement, nous assistons également au développement d'un réseau transnational d'édition numérique dont le nombre s'accroît d'année en année. Il s'agit globalement de nouveaux entrants et auteurs nationaux à la recherche de la visibilité et de la consécration livrés à des passeurs virtuels dans des plateformes qui fonctionnent comme des sortes de 'camps de rétention littéraires'! Il y a un nombre conséquent de récits, recueils de poésie ou de nouvelles et de romans (depuis 2010), sans identité propre au sens physique, embarqués sur de vastes plateformes numériques basées en France, en Allemagne et aux USA (Amazon KDP, Blurb, ibooksAuthor, lulu.com, Bookelis, etc.) avec d'autres sans grades du monde entier; mais vivant leur déterritorialisation comme le passage obligé pour acquérir une identité littéraire virtuelle en attendant une consécration mondiale qui donnerait finalement vie à ces œuvres.

Thématiquement donc, une large production fictionnelle basée sur le mémoriel (autobiographie avérée ou non), et le témoignage, a pu voir le jour en plus de l'édition traditionnelle grâce aux supports numériques, aux plateformes, à l'autoédition et au compte d'auteur. Cette production littéraire est rarement identifiée par les critiques et les universitaires et ne semble pas prise en compte dans les bibliographies nationales (France et Algérie). A partir d'une estimation partielle, nous pouvons considérer qu'entre 2015 et 2017 plus de 100 œuvres de fictions entre recueils de poésie, pièces de théâtre et romans ont été publiés sur ces supports dématérialisées à travers le monde (exemples: édilivre, lulu.com, jepublic.com, publibook.com, edifree.fr, thebookedition.com)<sup>10</sup>.

Toute cette production à vocation littéraire est quasiment invisible dans la sphère littéraire institutionnelle (revues, presse, colloques, conférences et ventes dédiées) dans la mesure, aussi, où elle n'est guère disponible en librairie ni dans les bibliothèques.

D'autre part, le réseau relationnel individuel<sup>11</sup> fait émerger de temps à autre des comptes rendus, souvent complaisants, dans la presse<sup>12</sup> sans qu'il y ait d'effet probant au travers la reconnaissance des pairs:

Il n'existe pas, non plus, une vraie critique professionnelle, compétente et honnête, car la corruption et le copinage ont envahi l'espace culturel d'une façon irrémédiable, à l'exception de quelques personnes qui sont la fierté de la critique algérienne, mais ils sont très (trop) peu nombreux et dépassés par une cohorte de "criticaillions" malfaisants, qui crient au génie dès que l'un des leurs édite un livre ou réalise un film ou expose un tableau. (Boudjedra, *Affaiblir la culture aujourd'hui*)

D'une manière générale, le peu de visibilité de la production littéraire numérique ou à compte d'auteur engendre chez les «écrivains» un fort sentiment de frustration, voire d'injustice du fait que la plupart de ces auteurs ne sont pas lus, distingués et plus largement médiatisés<sup>13</sup>. C'est là une des marques de leur posture: "En parlant de 'posture,' on désigne donc inséparablement la dimension rhétorique (textuelle) et actionnelle (contextuelle)" (Meinoz 271)

Alors que paradoxalement l'accélération de la visibilité à travers les réseaux sociaux en particulier et les articles journalistiques a pu mettre au premier plan, ces dernières années en Algérie, beaucoup d'auteurs issus souvent du milieu du journalisme, parmi lesquels on relève des «écritures tardives» pour certains (c'est-à-dire le passage à l'écriture fictionnelle après 50 ans). Dans la plupart des cas pour ces auteurs, c'est une manière de passer du magistère journalistique (pour la plupart d'entre eux) exercé pendant des décennies à un nouveau champ, celui de la littérature. Ce qui engendre à la fois des positionnements et des postures qui les distinguent des 'jeunes' auteurs par l'âge, mais aussi de leur connaissance des réseaux de pairs et des cercles culturels actifs et prescripteurs.

L'entrée en littérature et la recherche de la proximité avec les lecteurs et de la reconnaissance constituent pour la plupart des auteurs et, en particulier, pour les plus âgés, une sorte de processus d'individuation. Avec une mise à distance avec leur profession initiale qui leur a permis d'accumuler un capital culturel et d'avoir une légitimité culturelle au

niveau national (Amin Khan fonctionnaire international, Aïcha Kassoul universitaire-diplomate, Najib Stambouli journaliste, Mohamed Balhi journaliste, Rachid Mokhtari journaliste-critique Djamel Eddine Merdaci journaliste, etc.). Cette individuation marque en quelque sorte d'abord une rupture avec l'identité professionnelle, voire sociale. Sur un autre plan, c'est le cas également pour les écrivaines, (cf. la recherche de Christine Détrez (*L'écriture en maux*) sur les écrivaines marocaines et algériennes qui a dégagé, entre autres, leur appartenance à des milieux favorisés et l'exercice d'un second métier, en particulier). Pour Détrez, cette perspective permet de questionner l'image, encore présente dans l'espace public français, de la femme maghrébine enfermée et réduite à ses fonctions domestiques. Il s'agit pour ces écrivaines d'une véritable seconde vie et, surtout, d'une manière de se libérer, en partie, des contraintes liées au statut social, politique et professionnel (Détrez, *L'écriture en maux*).

Ce qui semble compter probablement à travers les déclarations et les interventions des écrivains en Algérie, c'est le besoin de la reconnaissance par les pairs autant que par les lecteurs en l'absence de cadres permanents de rencontres et d'échanges (salons du livre, ventes-dédicaces, ateliers d'écriture, conférences, etc.). Cela s'exprime à travers la question de la visibilité:

Je suis très content de la nouvelle visibilité des écrivains maghrébins. Je me souviens d'une époque où, à la sortie de l'un de mes livres, un journaliste français a écrit au début d'un article : "Encore un écrivain maghrébin!" Nous étions toujours de trop. Le problème aujourd'hui c'est que nous ne sommes pas lus dans nos pays. (Benmalek)

ou de celui de la mission dont l'écrivain s'autorise:

Je me considère comme un intellectuel du quotidien. Je lis beaucoup mais je vis en même temps avec les jeunes, je suis constamment à leur écoute. Je suis sensible à l'angoisse qui nous encercle. Pour moi le rôle de l'intellectuel est d'être visionnaire, d'alerter l'opinion publique et faire de la prophétie intellectuelle. (Zaoui)

Peu d'écrivains ont la possibilité d'établir un lien régulier avec un public de lecteurs. Cependant, le besoin de reconnaissance se traduit également au niveau de la communication dans la sphère personnelle (facebook et autres réseaux sociaux: par les salutations, les recommandations ou les

'like', etc.). Cette sphère privée a pris une importance considérable car elle fonctionne pour l'essentiel sur l'approbation, et crée des réseaux ou des mini-réseaux de solidarité qui peuvent être actifs lors des rencontres (mais pas toujours). A ces mini réseaux peuvent s'ajouter des annonces de rencontres, de manifestations, de comptes rendus et de vidéos. Enfin colloques et rencontres universitaires constituent le troisième niveau de visibilité et de reconnaissance. Les écrivains les plus actifs sont ceux qui parviennent à exister dans les trois sphères. D'où un effet d'accumulation pour ceux qui sont déjà connus et reconnus et qui vivent au pays (Kamel Daoud, Rachid Boudjedra, Amine Zaoui, Maïssa Bey, etc.).

### *Vers une littérature 'moyenne'?*

Rappelons que Pierre Bourdieu (1966) distinguait la sphère de légitimité à prétention universelle, la sphère du légitimable (dans les années 60, le jazz ou la photo) et la sphère de la légitimité segmentaire liée aux styles de vie du quotidien dont la meilleure illustration de nos jours se manifeste à travers les personnalités phares des réseaux sociaux, ou les blogueurs de YouTube.

Pourtant, à l'examen, l'univers littéraire en Algérie peut paraître, au vu de certaines modalités de son existence, quelque peu dysfonctionnel car la distinction entre sphère de la production élargie et sphère de la production restreinte n'a pas de réalité matérielle et institutionnelle marquée à travers des réseaux bien définis avec leurs acteurs et leurs produits. Il faudrait plutôt parler de l'émergence et de l'importance acquise par une 'littérature moyenne' que Heribert Tommek (6) a définie:

par sa position structurale intermédiaire et l'ambivalence esthétique qui en découle. Elle peut être qualifiée de littérature de divertissement de niveau supérieur présentant une "ambiguïté esthétique." Son caractère transmissible et reproductible la démarque de l'art issu de la haute culture, même si son public et ses récepteurs la perçoivent comme constituée d'événements singuliers. Elle s'apparente à un tour de prestidigitation qui au moment de sa présentation repose à la fois sur *l'art de l'illusion* et sur la bonne réalisation pratique d'un "truc." [...] À son *accessibilité moyenne* correspond une réception qui oscille entre la pleine concentration et la contemplation relevant du domaine de la haute culture et le divertissement du sujet relevant du domaine la culture populaire.

La différenciation se fait entre les œuvres médiatisées et plus ou moins lues (on y trouve davantage de livres dont les auteurs disposent déjà d'un fort capital de reconnaissance accumulé: Boudjedra, Sansal, Khadra, etc., ou d'une récente et intense médiatisation: Maïssa Bey, Daoud, Zaoui, etc.) et les productions plus confidentielles qui sont composées pour une grande part d'œuvres inabouties mais aussi de quelques écrits maîtrisés mais méconnus. Boualem Sansal (93) met sur le compte d'une accélération de la littérature moderne les effets induits au plan de la réception:

La littérature moderne se fait sur un rythme court. Le monde étant en rupture de sens, c'est-à-dire de perspective longue, l'actualité est sa seule mesure. Tout se fait dans le jour, le mois, l'année au plus. Formatés par la culture consumériste qui irrigue la pensée moderne, lecteurs, écrivains et éditeurs, contribuent à leur manière au raccourcissement du temps et de notre vision du monde. De ce point de vue, le seul vrai livre est le journal quotidien.

Nous pouvons en déduire, pour la période actuelle en Algérie, et en ce qui concerne la production en langue française, qu'il y a une certaine étroitesse du champ des positionnements et des pratiques littéraires (lectorat/espace de visibilité, etc.). Cela explique en partie la concurrence entre auteurs et la violence des expressions symboliques par lesquelles se manifestent les oppositions et les controverses. C'est en partie contre cette littérature 'moyenne' médiatisée que s'est élevé Rachid Boudjedra (*Je refuse de mélanger*) sans nuance: "Je n'aime pas la littérature de Yasmina Khadra. C'est une littérature de loisirs. Il n'est pas un écrivain dans le sens noble du terme. Autrement dit, un écrivain qui pose des questions et qui s'angoisse", a-t-il dit. Il a ironisé sur le fait "qu'il existe des écrivains de l'intérieur et des écrivains de l'extérieur."

Ainsi l'appel au boycott de l'écrivaine Sarah Haidar du Salon du livre d'Alger en 2017 en raison des propos machistes qu'aurait proféré le commissaire du Salon, n'a guère été suivi, non en raison d'un désaccord sur le fond, mais tout simplement parce que pour les plus connus comme pour les nouveaux entrants parmi les écrivains algériens, la présence au salon constitue la seule opportunité de rencontre des pairs, des médias et d'éventuels lecteurs qui ne trouvent pas les livres à proximité.

Malgré leur multiplication, mais aussi à cause de leur caractère éphémère, les prix littéraires institués en Algérie (Miliani 54-56) n'ont guère de conséquences sur la carrière commerciale du livre. A vrai dire, et à



quelques exceptions près, très peu de prix littéraires en Algérie ont perduré depuis l'indépendance. Ils restent de simples distinctions symboliques, souvent rapidement démonétisées (English; Bush et Ducourneau) ou frappés de suspicion parce que souvent organisés ou initiés par des structures étatiques:

La sécularisation contemporaine du littéraire, en conjuguant consommation et consécration dans le fétiche du livre-marchandise et en défendant une prescription confondant de plus en plus distinction et sélection entretient donc l'idée navrante selon laquelle l'écrivain célèbre est désormais soluble dans le marché. (Ducas 199).

Lors du Salon du Livre d'Alger de 2017, le roman de Mohammed Bouchareb, *La Fetwa*, prix Mohamed Dib 2016 n'a pas été signalé dans les comptes rendus de presse et n'a guère connu le succès éditorial que pouvait laisser présager sa distinction et sa thématique.

### *Quelques faits et effets de la réception critique*

S'il fallait caractériser à grands traits les recensions critiques littéraires de presse en Algérie, nous pouvons les classer rapidement en résumés de l'histoire, éloge du contenu et/ou de l'auteur, commentaires des valeurs (identité, histoire, référents culturels) et, enfin, critique des prises de position supposées ou avérées des auteurs. Rares sont les écrits qui relèvent les particularités esthétiques et stylistiques de l'œuvre dans une dynamique à la fois explicative et critique. Comme près de 80% des productions littéraires éditées en Algérie ne font l'objet d'aucune réception développée dans les journaux, cela rend davantage sensible le rôle de la presse et des médias dans la lutte pour la visibilité: "Dès lors et enfin, la légitimité est le résultat d'une lutte, la consécration le produit d'un acte performatif." (Benoît). La morphologie de la critique journalistique et universitaire qui s'exerce en Algérie pourrait répondre à la distinction entre critique de la sanction et critique de la performance proposée par Georges Maurand. La première tente d'interpréter les présupposés et les attentes d'une critique en acte (en particulier dans la presse), la seconde porte sur une appréciation des performances thématiques et stylistiques de l'œuvre elle-même (elle est massivement de nature universitaire). Ce que l'on pourrait de prime abord souligner c'est le fait que l'une et l'autre se manifestent parfois en même

temps. Critique de la sanction et critique de la performance se superposant dans une recherche pour satisfaire à la double injonction des destinataires potentiels (lecteur averti/non averti, et les pairs: journalistes/universitaires/écrivains).

Il est assez courant d'entendre dire que les écrivains algériens les plus importants sont souvent découverts par les éditeurs français alors que l'on sait que la plupart des écrivains médiatisés au niveau international ces vingt dernières années, ont d'abord commencé à être publiés en Algérie et ont été assez tôt remarqués par la critique journalistique et universitaire algériennes (Moulessehoul, Djemaï, Benmalek, Daoud, Adimi, etc.) Bien que, pour beaucoup d'entre eux, la part quantitative du lectorat en France et dans l'aire francophone est bien entendu supérieure par rapport au lectorat local<sup>14</sup>.

Cependant, la surdétermination accordée aux effets supposés de la réception française par nombre de critiques et de commentateurs en Algérie doit être, en réalité, diagnostiquée comme le signe de la pauvreté du champ littéraire algérien plutôt que l'expression d'une excellence et d'une dynamique<sup>15</sup>. Avec ses partisans et ses opposants, elle entretient et nourrit les argumentaires des lecteurs et des commentateurs locaux. Ainsi certains écrivains ont été accusés d'être des "contrebandiers de l'Histoire" (selon l'expression de Rachid Boudjedra) ou d'"informateurs locaux" (Mohamed Magani dixit); les condamnations les plus tranchées venant de pairs et visant préférentiellement les auteurs à succès éditorial en France<sup>16</sup>. On oppose la (supposée) relative absence d'audience des écrivains algériens des années 50 en France et leur refus de faire écho aux attentes du lectorat français à l'attitude (supposée) des écrivains médiatisés actuellement qui produiraient des œuvres sans vraie originalité et qui auraient, quelque part, trahi leurs peuples :

Invoker la notion d'informateur local ne diminue en rien la valeur des écrivains cités, elle nous sert simplement à saisir pourquoi telle littérature est privilégiée par rapport à telle autre. Et pourquoi Feraoun, Dib, Yacine et Djébar n'ont pas atteint leur succès en France, eux les écrivains de la dignité, qui ont emprunté l'âpre chemin de l'intégrité au mot, du respect de soi et de leur peuple. La génération perdue américaine a trouvé refuge à Paris pour échapper au corset puritain et répressif de leur milieu pour vivre libre, la génération des informateurs locaux leur a emboîté le pas avec des textes à l'eau de Cologne pour festoyer, esprits captifs, sur le compte et au détriment des sans-voix et des interdits de plateaux d'antenne. (Magani 7)

Ce sont ces condamnations devenues de plus en plus fréquentes et ses amalgames venus des pairs que déplore Boualem Sansal (*Entretien* 14):

C'est un mystère d'autant plus incompréhensible que nos 'crucificateurs' ne sont pas de pauvres commissaires politiques à la tâche, mais des universitaires et des journalistes importants, le gratin de la pensée et de ce qui reste de la culture dans le pays. On se demande ce qui les dérange, les opinions exprimées par ces écrivains ou leur succès à l'étranger ? Il est possible qu'ils espèrent quelque reconnaissance pour les hauts faits d'armes, attraper un traître ou un contrebandier, c'est la gloire.

Lors d'une rencontre en 2013,<sup>17</sup> Sarah Haidar déplorait la prolifération de ce qu'elle caractérisait comme une 'littérature de best-sellers.' Elle regrettait le caractère quelque peu opportuniste, populiste et commercial d'une certaine production. Par rapport à l'ancienne génération, l'écrivaine ne revendiquait pas systématiquement la rupture et le rejet, mais elle disait n'avoir jamais été inspirée par la vocation sociopolitique de certaines œuvres littéraires. Cependant, elle estimait que les années 80 et 90 étaient plus riches en créativité et en innovation en matière de formes littéraires.

La médiatisation de certaines œuvres ou auteurs en France (qui s'affirment d'abord par une qualité littéraire minimale) branchés sur des thématiques d'actualité porteuses (islam, femmes, terrorisme, etc.) se fonde sur des processus de visibilité et de promotion que démultiplient (relativement) les ventes, les prix littéraires et la présence dans les supports médias<sup>18</sup>. La perception plus ou moins convenue du fonctionnement du marché littéraire est convaincue, naïvement, que le choix d'une thématique 'du moment' ouvre automatiquement les portes de l'édition en France et consécutivement à une médiatisation importante. Il faudrait rappeler le nombre important d'auteurs dont les œuvres ont été refusées par les éditeurs français (et qui se rabattent ensuite sur l'autoédition ou la publication numérique). Comme ce fut le cas également des œuvres suscitées par la tragédie nationale en Algérie durant les années 90. Entre 1993 et 1998 plus d'une cinquantaine de romans portant sur cette thématique ont été édités en France, parmi lesquels seule une dizaine qui relevait d'un réel investissement littéraire, a connu une certaine audience. Mais l'on pourrait dire que ce fut aussi le sort des productions axées sur l'après septembre 2001, les thématiques sur la guerre d'Algérie ou la situation des femmes dans le monde arabe.

Enfin, on remarquera, à titre indicatif, que la plupart des œuvres qui ont été distinguées ces dernières années en France (parfois à travers l'octroi d'un prix littéraire) comportent soit des références à la période coloniale, soit à des figures françaises médiatrices (Albert Camus, Fernand Yveton, Edmond Charlot, etc.), ou des périodes historiques marquantes (Yasmina Khadra, Kamel Daoud, Boualem Sansal, Malika Mokeddem, Salim Bachi, Maïssa Bey, etc.). Cependant, y compris parmi les écrivains les plus au fait du monde littéraire, il existe une attitude quelque peu suspicieuse à l'encontre des éditeurs français accusés directement ou implicitement de pratiques plus ou moins manipulatrices<sup>19</sup>:

L'éditeur français ou autre peut toujours se prévaloir d'avoir cherché la littérature algérienne à sa source, à Alger. J'ai eu la faiblesse de croire que le moment est arrivé où les éditeurs étrangers prennent enfin la peine de venir à la rencontre des écrivains algériens dans leur pays.

En réalité, ils viennent chercher, dans les textes littéraires, la confirmation du réalisme sordide exposé par leurs auteurs autochtones, la validation des préjugés et des idées reçues déjà solidement enracinés dans leurs sociétés. (Magani)

D'une manière générale, l'exercice proprement littéraire de l'écriture est de ce fait marqué par des glissements imposés par les mécanismes de la médiatisation interne et externe en cours et le rétrécissement de la demande globale. Le passage à la fiction de poètes, hommes de théâtre ou de critiques en est l'une des manifestations (Lazhari Labter, Mohamed Sehaba, Mohamed Fellag, Slimane Benaïssa, Rachid Mokhtari, etc.) et le choix de la couleur thématique une marque de fabrique (identité amazigh chez Arezki Metref à travers la dimension temporelle et spatiale; sexualité et islam chez Amine Zaoui, ou pour d'autres auteurs la fascination par les marqueurs culturels patrimoniaux: *Hizya* repris par Maïssa Bey et Lazhari Labter, l'Emir Abdelkader romancé par Abdelkader Djemaï et Waciny Laaredj, etc.). Le passé colonial où se disent les peines et les luttes est une des polarités du roman national et continue à être investi par certaines écritures. Alors que la décennie noire s'actualise par des investigations politico-policières: *Général K* de Mustapha Yalaoui, *1994* de Adlène Meddi, *Le temps de mourir* de Saïd Oussad, *Clandestine* de Hamid Grine largement nourries de faits d'actualité, de vécu personnel ou alors de sensibilités psychologiques, sans que ces œuvres ne prétendent s'enfermer dans le genre. Une part non négligeable des approches romanesques de

la nouvelle génération s'appuie sur des visions dystopiques nourries de culture de science-fiction (Riad Girod, Riadh Hadri, etc.). Depuis 2000 de nouvelles écrivaines (Nassira Belloula, Sarah Haider, Selma Guettaf, Hadjira Bali, Amina Mekahli, Kaouther Adimi, etc.) s'imposent à travers des expériences romanesques qui interrogent la question des femmes dans l'univers social algérien. Elles évoquent diverses thématiques à la fois historiques et actuelles où des personnages féminins sont au centre de leurs fictions mais pas exclusivement. Elles diversifient surtout leurs modes d'expression littéraire (autofiction, récits épistolaires, théâtre, etc.) et offrent de ce fait une variété de tonalités et de perceptions.

### *Conclusion*

Nous pouvons reconnaître à travers certains constats et observations un état transitoire du champ littéraire algérien de langue française depuis le début des années 2000. Sa bipolarité s'est imposée au plan de la production et de la réception entre la France et l'Algérie avec des effets d'amplification indéniable pour certaines œuvres et certains auteurs mais aussi des interactions idéologiques et médiatiques<sup>20</sup>. D'autre part, la diversification des modes de publication (traditionnels et numériques) a multiplié le nombre d'auteurs alors que la médiatisation a tendance à se focaliser sur un nombre de plus en plus restreint d'œuvres et d'écrivains qui semblent définir un mode d'écriture et de traitement thématique 'moyens'. Enfin, les différences générationnelles commencent à distinguer les écrivains entre eux avec une forte présence de la génération née avant l'indépendance et un phénomène de canonisation de certains écrivains des années '50 (Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Mammeri, Mohamed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun, Assia Djebar). Cette dynamique qu'il faut lier également aux interactions linguistiques (arabe, français, tamazigh) crée indéniablement des nouvelles structurations institutionnelles du champ littéraire. Il faudrait croire que la double polarisation (France/Algérie) va continuer encore à agir aussi bien sur la production que sur la réception pendant un moment encore<sup>21</sup>. Cela constitue à la fois un mode incitatif pour les auteurs et un sujet de divergences et de controverses pour la critique. En dernier ressort, ce sont les conditions mêmes de l'émergence d'un champ littéraire tendanciellement autonome qui sont en jeu<sup>22</sup>.



- 1 La production littéraire de la diaspora est une donnée qui devrait également être prise en compte, en France pour une grande part, mais pas seulement. Signalons pour l'exemple les ouvrages littéraires d'auteurs canadiens d'origine algérienne présentés lors du salon du livre de Montréal en novembre 2017. Chekirou, Salah. *L'otage*. Québec: Belle Feuille; El Achkar. Salah. *Splendeur et mélancolie*. Société des Écrivains; El-Ghadban, Yara. *Le parfum de Nour*, Mémoire d'encrier; Farhoud, Abba. *Au grand soleil cachez vos filles*. VLB Éditeur; Lakhdari, Nadia. *#colocs*. Malins; Lakhdari King, Nadia. *Histoires de filles au chalet* Goélette; Larissa Assou, Sonia. *Ivoire et Ben*. Cornac; Latif-Ghattas, Mona. *Ceci n'est pas un paradis*. Espace de la diversité; Legdani, Sanaa. *Le hérisson irritabile*. Coup d'œil; Rejdalen, Mouloud. *L'étoile gravée*. Première Chance.
- 2 Il faut signaler l'importante thèse de doctorat soutenue en décembre 2015 à l'EHESS par Tristan Leperlier, *La guerre des langues ? Le champ littéraire algérien pendant la "décennie noire" (1988-2003). Crise politique et consécration nationales*. Outre la constitution d'un corpus important dans une perspective critique, cette thèse renouvelle en grande partie et à nouveaux frais un certain nombre de problématiques concernant la littérature algérienne de langue française.
- 3 A propos des décentrement de la réception de certaines œuvres d'écrivains algériens, citons l'intéressante étude au sujet de la réception française et anglo-saxonne de Joseph Ford. Plus globalement Anne Roche (33-36) problématise la question de la réception des textes littéraires dans une perspective diachronique.
- 4 1200 éditeurs sont répertoriés au dépôt légal de la Bibliothèque nationale en Algérie en 2016. On compte parmi eux un grand nombre "d'éditeurs saisonniers" qui ne publient qu'en fonction des soutiens publics et des manifestations officielles. Ainsi 263 titres tirés à 1500 exemplaires furent subventionnés et distribués par le ministère de la culture aux bibliothèques publiques lors du Festival Panafricain d'Alger de 2009. En 2011, 450 titres également édités à 1500 exemplaires chacun firent l'objet de la même opération à l'occasion de la manifestation Tlemcen, capitale de la culture islamique pour l'année 2011.

- 5 Au sujet de l'édition et du lectorat en Algérie actuellement, je renvoie à l'étude de Abdelkader Abdelillah (2016), au premier chapitre de la première partie d'Hadj Miliani (22-73) ainsi qu'à la courte synthèse de Tristan Leperlier (*L'édition littéraire algérienne* 105-107) et à la communication de l'éditeur Azeddine Guerfi (2018).
- 6 Quelques titres d'ouvrages récents en témoignent: "Tahar Djaout, un écrivain pérenne," "Mimouni, l'écrivain témoin et conscience," "Tahar Djaout, un talent cisailé," "Eternel Mammeri," "Benhadouga, la vérité, le rêve, l'espérance," "Malek Haddad, mission accomplie," etc.
- 7 Le récent pamphlet de Rachid Boudjedra (2017) en est l'une des meilleures illustrations.
- 8 J'ai développé l'analyse de cette polémique dans ma thèse de doctorat à laquelle j'emprunte l'essentiel de ce passage.
- 9 J'entends par lectorat francophone les lecteurs qui lisent de 3 à 10 ouvrages littéraires au moins par an. Plusieurs enquêtes montrent que ce sont les lecteurs âgés de plus de 50 ans qui lisent le plus d'ouvrages et préférentiellement en langue française. Parmi les indicateurs il faut citer, entre autres, l'enquête de l'IPSOFIM pour l'ANEP (2006), les données recueillies lors du recensement de 2008 et celles de l'ONS, (2012). J'ajouterai en complément Miliani.
- 10 Quelques titres d'auteurs algériens édités en 2016 par Edilivre: *La Foudre de mots; Les Ogres du Djurdjura; L'Audace de rêver; Le Souffle des mots; Sur les yeux du créateur la vérité fait lumière. Les Poèmes de l'enfant prodige; Un jour de pluie; Les Vents soufflent sur Constantine; L'instant de plaisir; Dilemme funeste. Réflexions, nouvelles, poèmes et autres écrits; Jusqu'au bout du voyage. Nouvelles; Mouroir conjugal; L'Algérie des extrêmes; Paradis des âmes perdues; Des cœurs en crue; Bicolor.*
- 11 "L'écrasante majorité des journalistes algériens ne promeut que les 'copains' quand ils ne se font pas sous-traitants de la critique française, puisque tout ce qui est médiatisé en France devient, pour cette seule raison, digne d'intérêt." Ali Chibani (10/11)
- 12 Entre autre exemple, *El Watan Week end* (2017: 26/5) consacre une page d'entretien et une page entière de bonnes feuilles à un poète 'primo-publiant' chez Edilivre, Fadhel Zakour dont le moins que l'on puisse dire est que les textes ne brillent pas particulièrement par leur originalité poétique.
- 13 Dans ses notes sur l'histoire littéraire, récemment éditées, Louis Althusser s'interrogeait sur la nécessité de faire une contre-histoire littéraire qui tiendrait compte de tous ceux dont on ne parle pas: "On pourrait essayer de faire une contre-histoire littéraire, une histoire de l'avortement littéraire, l'histoire du nonaccès au statut littéraire d'œuvres qui ont pourtant été conçues comme littéraires par leurs auteurs. Ça serait vraiment intéressant, mais personne n'a jamais essayé cette chose-là. Ce serait une contre-épreuve extraordinairement probante." (54)

- 14 *Libération.fr* à travers une dépêche de l'AFP donne au 21 juillet 2015 les chiffres de vente du roman de Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête*: 130000 en France et 14000 en Algérie. Selon son editrice algérienne, Selma Hellal, en 2018 le livre avait été vendu à cette date à 250 000 exemplaires en France et 15000 en Algérie en dehors des traductions dans le monde.
- 15 Comme le soulignait par ailleurs Joseph Ford (69), la réception littéraire française ou anglo-saxonne prend rarement en compte les publications des auteurs algériens édités en Algérie.
- 16 Nous signalerons en particulier les articles extrêmement critiques, voire virulents du professeur Abdellali Merdaci de l'Université de Constantine, spécialiste de l'histoire littéraire algérienne, consacrés aux auteurs algériens à succès de Boualem Sansal à Kaouther Adimi en passant par Kamel Daoud et Yasmina Khadra.
- 17 *Colloque international, Présence de nouvelles voix culturelles en Méditerranée*, UCCLLA-CRASC, Université de Mostaganem, 20-21 octobre 2013.
- 18 Pour une approche détaillée concernant le parcours éditorial de l'écrivain Yasmina Khadra, lire à ce sujet l'étude de Tristan Leperlier (*Littérature algérienne*).
- 19 A propos de Magani, lire l'analyse du parcours de cet auteur et ses positionnements dans Leperlier (*La guerre des langues?*, 621).
- 20 Au sujet des enjeux et du rôle de la critique française il faut se référer à l'ouvrage de Kaouther Harchi (2016) et débat qui s'est engagé entre Amel Chaouati et Kaouther Harchi (*El Watan*). Chaouati reprochant à Harchi d'avoir mis sur le même plan les écrivains de la période coloniale et de la post-indépendance et d'avoir considéré que c'est la critique parisienne qui a imposé et impose la reconnaissance de certains écrivains algériens.
- 21 Pour Leperlier (*La guerre des langues?* 672), il s'agit même de l'élément le plus marquant quand il affirme en conclusion de sa thèse : "que le clivage linguistique entre francophones et arabophones n'est pas aussi radical qu'on l'a bien souvent présenté: l'opposition entre un pôle national et un pôle international apparaît ici bien plus déterminant."
- 22 "La théorie des champs a une application universelle à condition que, d'une part soient réunis les éléments nécessaires à leur autonomisation (division du travail, corps de spécialiste, instances spécifiques, marché) et que, d'autre part leurs principes de structuration soient étudiés empiriquement dans le contexte historique donné." (Sapiro).





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# Elias Canettis Idee der Sprache und der Literatur. Überlegungen in *Die Blendung* und *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch*

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## *Themenstellung*

Der vorliegende Beitrag beabsichtigt, das Sprach- und Literaturkonzept, das Elias Canetti in seinem Roman *Die Blendung* (1935) entwirft, zu analysieren. Vergleichend wird der Roman im Zusammenhang mit Canettis Reisebericht *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* (1968) untersucht. In beiden Werken reflektiert Canetti die Sprachfähigkeit des Menschen und die ursprünglich angelegten Möglichkeiten des Menschen in der Sprache. Letztere spielt bei Canetti eine grundlegende Rolle nicht nur im autobiographischen Bereich, man denke an die Anfangsszene seiner Autobiographie, *Die gerettete Zunge* (1977). Sie scheint eher ein geheimnisvoller Zauber zu sein, in dem mythische Kräfte wirksam sind: Canetti lässt sie in seinem Leben und in seinem Werk auf sich einwirken, durch Klang und Ton erfährt er unmittelbar die Welt. Sprache bedeutet für ihn nicht nur ein kommunikatives Mittel oder einfach ein Medium. In ihr spiegelt sich eine ganze Welt, die vergangene und die neue, die sich durch die Sprache ins Leben rufen lassen. In Canettis Vorstellung von Literatur ist die Rolle der Wörter grundlegend: Die Ideen von Literatur, von Wort, von Erzählung und Schrift selbst schreiben sich in ein doppeltes und begleitendes Register ein. Sie gehören in erster Linie zu den literarischen Tatsachen, zur Erfahrung und zur Welt des Dichters und des Schriftstellers, darüber hinaus machen sie die tragende Struktur des Lebens aus. Sehr stark ist die Verbindung Canettis mit dem Wort, das ein eigenes Leben besitzt,

das das Leben selbst ist und das den scheinbaren Tod dessen überlebt, was es mitteilt:

[...] nämlich daß es die Worte selber sind, die einen nicht loslassen, die einzelnen Worte an sich, jenseits aller größten Zusammenhänge [...] daß sie von einer besonderen Leidenschaft geladen sind. Sie sind eigentlich wie Menschen, sie lassen sich nicht vernachlässigen oder vergessen. Wie immer sie verwahrt werden, sie behalten ihr Leben, plötzlich springen sie hervor und erzwingen ihr Recht. (Canetti, *Das Gewissen der Worte, Wortanfänge* 255-256).

Obwohl Sprache und Literatur nicht die zentralen Themen in *Die Blendung* und *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* sind, stellen beide Texte verstreute Reflexionen über den beschwörenden Wert des Wortes, dessen Bedeutung und die Rolle der Literatur im menschlichen Leben durch die Stimmen der unterschiedlichen Figuren dar. Auch wenn es sich um zwei verschiedene Gattungen handelt und die Texte auch chronologisch weit voneinander entfernt sind, wird in diesem Beitrag die These vertreten, dass der autobiographische Reisebericht auf Ideen Canettis über Literatur und Sprache zurückgreift, die im Roman und in den anderen Werken entwickelt werden, diese bestätigt und weiter dekliniert. Sowohl in *Die Blendung* wie auch in *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* stellt die Sprache einen immerwährenden Arbeitsprozess dar, sie erlaubt es der Subjektivität und der Individualität, sich zu entwickeln, und eben in diesem Prozess von Identitäts- und Selbstbestimmung zeigt sie sich als das wichtigste Instrument der Macht. Ihre Kraft wird durch das Sehen und das Hören ergänzt. In *Die Blendung* spielen die Schrift und die Sprache eine wichtige Rolle, sie hängen mit Handeln und Denken zusammen. Die Schrift betrachtet Canetti auch in *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* als Zeichen der westlichen Kultur (Kapitel *Erzähler und Schreiber*), als deren Fixierung, was aber auch bedeutet, – mit Foucaults Worten – “sich von Beginn an in den virtuellen Raum der Selbstrepräsentation und der Verdopplung zu stellen; wenn die Schrift nicht das Ding, sondern das Sprechen repräsentiert, dann würde das sprachliche Kunstwerk nichts anderes tun als sich tiefer in diese ungreifbare Dichte des Spiegels vorzuwagen [...]” (Foucault, *Schriften zur Literatur* 88). Bei Canetti wird sie zum Prinzip der Kunst, mehr wiederzufinden, als verloren gegangen ist und alle Dinge gleichsam wie zum ersten Mal zu betrachten. Obwohl er an der Kommunikationsfähigkeit der Sprache zweifelt, wie er uns im Roman durch die Dialoge unter den Figuren zeigt, ist er auch stark

überzeugt, dass die Sprache ein Speicher ist, der trotz aller Verzerrungen das Leben und die Hoffnung des Menschen in sich aufbewahrt.

Canettis Werk entwuchs der literarischen Tradition der Jahrhundertwende, insbesondere der Zeit der Sprachkritik, und wurde von ihr stark beeinflusst (Belobratov; Kacianka): Sicherlich kannte er den gängigen Sprachdiskurs seiner Zeit, vor allem durch das Werk Franz Kafkas, Karl Kraus', Rainer Maria Rilkes usw., Autoren, die er als Vorbilder hoch schätzte. Grundlegend sind aber auch die philosophischen Ideen Friedrich Nietzsches (D'Angelo 23-62; Améry; Grenier), den er als seinen lebenslangen Feind beschreibt, sowie die von Fritz Mauthner und Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgensteins Kritik an der Alltagssprache im *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921) zum Beispiel, die eine ideale Sprache fordert, die ihrer Struktur nach die Wirklichkeit wiederspiegeln sollte, verwandelt Canetti in seinem Roman in eine scharf ironische Frage nach der Möglichkeit dieser Sprache überhaupt. Diese Frage eingehend zu analysieren, ermöglicht es, Canettis Idee von Sprache und Literatur zu beleuchten und sie aus einer kulturhistorischen und sozialkritischen Perspektive zu untersuchen. Mit dem Problem der Sprache und der Definition der Literatur ist auch das der Mission des Dichters verbunden (Canetti, *Das Gewissen der Worte* 16). Nach Canetti ist es die Aufgabe des Dichters, die Welt als Ganzes zu erfassen. Der wahre Dichter soll eine Welt schaffen, in der Erkenntnis mittels poetischer Sprache entsteht.

Die vorgeschlagene Analyse bedarf zuerst der Diskurstheorie als Untersuchungsmethode, da Diskurse die verschiedensten Bereiche einer Kultur durchziehen und die Fähigkeit haben – mit Foucaults Worten –, „Beziehungen zwischen Institutionen, ökonomischen und gesellschaftlichen Prozessen, Verhaltensnormen, Normsystemen, Techniken, Klassifikationstypen und Charakterisierungsweisen herzustellen“ (Foucault, *Archäologie des Wissens* 68). Die Analyse der Diskurse bezieht auch eine Untersuchung der Macht mit ein: Literatur wird in diesem Zusammenhang als Gegendiskurs begriffen, der die Macht der Diskurse untergräbt. Diesbezüglich definiert Beate Burtscher-Bechter (266) literarische Texte als Knotenpunkte im „Netzwerk verschiedener Diskurse:“ Es soll zunächst die Frage gestellt werden, welche Diskurse in einem Werk thematisiert und ausgedrückt werden. Das ist in Bezug auf Canettis Roman von besonders grundlegender Bedeutung, da in ihm eine Vielfalt von Themen dargestellt werden, die im Stil und in den akustischen Masken (Durzak, *Akustische Maske und Maskensprung* 497-516) Canettis

Kampf gegen die herrschenden Diskurse seiner Zeit, gegen Nietzsches Philosophie und Freuds Psychoanalyse, gegen die Macht der Diskurse selbst symbolisiert und deren Geltung somit bestreitet.

Auch wenn also Sprache und Literatur keine Hauptthemen in diesen Werken sind, werden sie mit anderen Aspekten und Elementen verwoben und beeinflussen sich wechselseitig: In *Das Gewissen der Worte*, im Aufsatz *Karl Kraus, Schule des Widerstands*, behauptet Canetti in Bezug auf die Sprache:

Dank ihm [Kraus, I.F.] begann ich zu fassen, daß der einzelne Mensch eine sprachliche Gestalt hat, durch die er sich von allen anderen abhebt. Ich begriff, daß Menschen zwar zueinander sprechen, aber sich nicht verstehen; daß ihre Worte Stöße sind, die an den Worten der anderen abprallen; daß es keine größere Illusion gibt als die Meinung, Sprache sei ein Mittel der Kommunikation zwischen Menschen. Man spricht zum andern, aber so, daß er einen nicht versteht. Man schreit, er schreit zurück, die Ejakulation, die in der Grammatik ein kümmerliches Dasein fristet, bemächtigt sich der Sprache. [...] (Canetti, *Das Gewissen der Worte* 136)

In dieser Anerkennung der Wichtigkeit Kraus' in seinem Leben und Werk und in der Annahme, dass der Mensch eine "sprachliche Gestalt hat," dass er also nur mittels der Sprache seine Gedanken und Emotionen ausdrückt, dass er sich jedoch nicht mit seinen Mitmenschen verständigen kann, stellt Canetti das Programm seines Romans dar. Für Canetti geschieht alles in der Sprache, die darauf zielt, in der Welt die Wahrheit zu enthüllen, den Unsinn des menschlichen Lebens zu entmythisieren: Seine Hingabe an die Sprache ist die Art und Weise, zum Menschen zu gelangen, die Mannigfaltigkeit des Lebens zu offenbaren. Die Sprache entziffert Gefühle, Emotionen, Wünsche, sie ermöglicht ein erkennendes Verfahren der wahren Wirklichkeit des Menschen. In *Die Blendung* verliert aber die Sprache durch Verzerrungen ihren Kommunikationscharakter: Die Figuren, denkt man nur an die Dialoge zwischen Peter Kien und Therese im ersten Teil, sprechen miteinander, hören einander jedoch nicht zu; es ist, als ob sie Monologe führten. Obwohl sie dieselbe Sprache sprechen, deklinieren sie sie in Bezug auf ihre Weltsicht und gesellschaftliche Zugehörigkeit:

Aber dieselben Worte, die nicht zu verstehen sind, die isolierend wirken, die eine Art von akustischer Gestalt schaffen, sind nicht etwa rar oder neu, von diesen auf ihre Vereinzeltheit bedachten Geschöpfe erfunden: es sind Worte, wie sie am häufigsten gebraucht werden, Phrasen, das Allerallgemeinste, hundertausendfach Gesagte,



und dieses, genau dieses, benutzen sie, um ihren Eigenwillen zu bekunden. Schöne, häßliche, edle, gemeine, heilige, profane Worte, alle geraten in dieses tumultuöse Reservoir, und jeder fängt sich heraus, was seiner Trägheit paßt; und wiederholt es, bis es nicht zu erkennen ist, bis es etwas ganz anderes, das Gegenteil von dem sagt, was es einmal bedeutete. (Canetti, *Das Gewissen der Worte* 136, 137)

Bei diesen Figuren ist der Sprachverfall nicht ein Prozess, sondern eine Kondition: Die sinnlose Mechanik ihrer Reden, welche die Sprache wie das Denken abschließt, ist das Merkmal einer Entfremdung, die Erkenntnis und Handlung nicht zulässt. Ihre Sprechweisen bilden eine eigene Realität, die sich als Grenzen des Geistes in der Alltagssprache zeigt. Es geht aber nur um subjektive Realitäten, jedoch nicht um eine Einheit mit einer Sprachgemeinschaft (soziale Dimension der Sprache).

Canetti, der sich von den Sprachen und den Stimmen der Welt verführen lässt, betrachtet die Mehrsprachigkeit der Welt als eines der größten Wunder, da diese Mannigfaltigkeit zum Paradoxon führt, indem es für dieselben Dinge verschiedene Namen gibt (Costantino 16). Sich der Sprache nur als Kommunikationsmittel zu bedienen, bedeutet, ihre eigentliche Funktion zu verfehlen, welche imstande ist, Wahrheit und Erkenntnis zu vermitteln. Die Macht, die die Worte auf die Welt und die Dinge ausüben, zusammen mit den akustischen Masken oder den Sprachgestaltungen zeigen die Wichtigkeit der Sprache im menschlichen Leben und die Unmöglichkeit in der modernen Welt, sich in der Sprache zu verwirklichen, da Sprache und Lebensform weit voneinander entfernt bleiben. Der Protagonist des Romans lebt in seiner Sprache und vermischt Erwartung mit Erfüllung, Zukunft mit Gegenwart (Magris, *Das geblendete Ich* 344-375): Da er eine andere Sprache als seine Mitmenschen spricht, kann seine Wirklichkeit mit der gegebenen Realität nicht identisch sein. Diesbezüglich wird das Denken über die Sprache zum Untersuchungsgegenstand, zum Objekt des ironischen Nachdenkens über die Inhalte und Werte einer Gesellschaft.

### *1. Das Nachdenken über die Sprache in Die Blendung und Die Stimmen von Marrakesch*

Dieser epochale Roman stellt die Katastrophe einer Gesellschaft dar, die auf die Möglichkeit einer wechselseitigen Verständigung unter ihren Individuen verzichtet und den Wert der Kultur und der Literatur

missverstanden hat, wobei sie diese in leere Ersatzmittel verwandelte. Durch den Text stellt Canetti die Frage nach den Möglichkeiten des Sagbaren, er stellt alle Diskurse in Frage. Er verachtet das Verhalten des Bürgertums, den romantisch-liberalen Idealismus, den fanatischen Patriotismus und die Dummheit der Bürokratie. Welche Rolle bekommt die Literatur in diesem Zusammenhang? Was macht der Mensch, um sich über die hässliche Wirklichkeit hinwegtäuschen zu können? Das sind die Fragen, die er sich aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach stellt, wenn er diesen Roman schreibt:

Eines Tages kam mir der Gedanke, daß die Welt nicht mehr so darzustellen war wie in früheren Romanen, sozusagen, vom Standpunkt *eines* Schriftstellers aus, die Welt war *zerfallen*, und nur wenn man den Mut hatte, sie in ihrer Zerfallenheit zu zeigen, war es noch möglich, eine wahrhafte Vorstellung von ihr zu geben. Das bedeutete aber nicht, daß man sich an ein chaotisches Buch zu machen hätte, in dem nicht mehr zu verstehen war, im Gegenteil, man mußte mit strengster Konsequenz extreme Individuen erfinden, so wie die, aus denen die Welt ja auch bestand, und diese auf die Spitze getriebenen Individuen in ihrer Geschiedenheit nebeneinanderstellen. (Canetti, *Das Gewissen der Worte, Das erste Buch: Die Blendung* 331)

Der Zusammenhang zwischen Denken und Schrift thematisiert den beständigen Dialog zwischen Denken und Dichten, den Weg der Erkenntnis durch die und in der Sprache: Letztere wird zum Ort, an dem die Erkenntnis sich entfaltet, bildet und experimentiert (Canetti, *Das Gewissen der Worte* 45, 48). Die Erzählung liegt an der Grenze ihrer epischen Fähigkeit: In der Beschreibung der Figuren des Romans, die unfähig sind, eine gemeinsame Sprache zu finden, und somit keine Beziehung zur Welt haben, bedeutet Schreiben nicht nur, die Welt darzustellen, sondern eher dem ethischen Urteil eine ästhetische Form zu verleihen. Der Roman strebt nach Universalität, er stellt ein komplexes System, einen Diskurs dar, in dem bestimmte Regeln innerhalb der zeitgenössischen Kultur befolgt werden. Der Autor versteckt sich hinter seinen Figuren, er präsentiert verschiedene Standpunkte und Sichtweisen, woraus sich mehrere Weltansichten ergeben. In dem Versuch, die Sprache zu charakterisieren, taucht die Sehnsucht nach einer vollkommenen, ursprünglichen und mythischen Sprache auf, die den Menschen auf einen rutschigen Weg führt, auf dem es keine Reibung mehr gibt.

Zwischen den Zeilen des Romans kann man die sprachphilosophischen Ideen dieser Zeit erblicken, die zweifelsohne auf Canettis Bestimmung der

Sprache eingewirkt haben. Zu seiner Zeit war man zu einer tiefen Krise der sprachlichen Darstellung gelangt: Ist es überhaupt möglich, etwas durch Worte auszusprechen und zu schildern? Canetti wird vor allem – so die These dieses Beitrags – von Fritz Mauthners Idee der Sprache fasziniert und beeinflusst. Mauthner greift in seinen *Beiträge[n] zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1901) den von Nietzsche geprägten Sprachdiskurs auf und deklariert die menschliche Erkenntnis als eine perspektivistisch gebundene. Die menschliche Welterkenntnis ist im Medium der Sprache nicht möglich, die als lautliche Umsetzung von Einbildungen begriffen wird, die nicht den Dingen, sondern den menschlichen Empfindungs- und Vorstellungsmöglichkeiten entsprechen. Nach Mauthner vermag die Sprache es nicht, die Wirklichkeit abzubilden, ihre Worte rufen keine Bilder der Wirklichkeitswelt auf, sondern nur Bilder von Bildern. Jedes Wort trägt in sich eine endlose Entwicklung von Metapher zu Metapher. Daraus entsteht die Frage: Unter welchen Umständen ist der Mensch fähig, die Welt zu erkennen? Was für Grenzen baut er sich auf? Sprache existiert prinzipiell nur individuell: Man projiziert seine Sprache in die Welt und erhält so ein mehr oder weniger verzerrtes Bild der Wirklichkeit, weswegen sie kein Mittel der Erkenntnis sein kann. Dementsprechend findet Canetti sich als Schriftsteller in extremer Not: Kann die Wirklichkeit nicht mehr mit Worten erfasst werden, erlebt man den Verlust einer Realität, die sich nicht mehr beschreiben lässt, so gibt es keinen Ausweg aus dem sprachlichen Dilemma, da Kommunikation nur mittels individueller Sprachen möglich ist, die sich von Sprechakt zu Sprechakt noch ändern können und Sprache ist nicht nur ein Element der Handlung, sondern eine Handlungsstruktur. Wie Mauthner (Mauthner, III 636) glaubt Canetti, dass die Bedeutung eines Wortes in sich nicht existiert, sondern nur in seinem Gebrauch. Die Bedeutung ist mit dem Gebrauch des Wortes verbunden, das Verstehen von Wörtern und Erklärungen wurzelt tief in der Tradition, in den vorgegebenen Regeln, welche unsere Sprache und Welt regieren. Sprache ist kein bloßes Zeichensystem, sondern eine spezifische, selbständige Dimension der Wirklichkeit. Die Welt wird zur Sprache und die Realität reduziert sich auf die Weltsicht der einzelnen Wirklichkeiten. Damit verbunden ist die Rolle der menschlichen Sinne, durch welche subjektive Erlebnisse der Welt möglich sind: Canetti ist sich dessen bewusst, dass der Mensch nur eine Seite der Realität wahrnehmen kann und damit zugleich auch eine andere Seite vernachlässigt. Ein Beispiel dafür ist der Protagonist des Romans, Peter Kien: Er entwickelt eine eigene Weltansicht und Philosophie über

seine "kleinlichen Sinne" (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 73), seine Erfahrungen und Kenntnisse geschehen nach der Willkür seiner Logik in komplizierten Schlussfolgerungen. Er gebraucht die Sprache als eine Art Maske, er wird auf eine Stimme reduziert. Wie Mauthner und Wittgenstein versucht Canetti durch die dichterische Form des Romans zu verstehen, wie die Sprache aufgebaut ist, wie sie Tatsachen, d.h. Wirklichkeit, beschreiben kann. Wenn die Struktur der Sprache mit derjenigen der Welt identisch ist, müsste die Welt und ihre Substanz durch die logische Analyse der Sprache begriffen werden können. Wenn es aber nicht so ist, geschieht es wie im Roman, dass die Figuren nicht in der Lage sind, miteinander zu kommunizieren, es werden Fragen gestellt, die nicht eindeutig beantwortet werden können. Canetti scheint sich zu fragen: Gibt es Sprachen, in denen man Kommunikation führen kann? Wie kommt eine Kommunikation zustande? Wie kann man die Bedeutung eines Wortes bestimmen? Wie wird die Sprache einzelner Menschen von ihrer Denkweise bestimmt? Ist die Sprache die Abbildung der Realität? Die Dialoge zwischen Peter Kien und Therese im ersten Teil des Romans sind ein Versuch, diese Fragen zu beantworten: Auch wenn sie miteinander sprechen, treffen sich die Sprache der Philologie Kiens und die alltägliche Rede von Therese nicht. Beide Figuren sprechen nicht aus dem eigenen Ich heraus: Sie sprechen dieselbe Sprache, jedoch jeder auf der Grundlage seiner eigenen Erfahrung, somit treffen in einer gemeinsamen Sprache verschiedene Welten aufeinander. In dieser Unmöglichkeit der Kommunikation zeigt sich die Entmenschlichung von Peter Kien, sein Nicht-Wahrnehmen der realen Welt: Das zerstörerische Potential der Alltagssprache, das Primitive und das Brutale Thereses und ihrer begrenzten Weltsicht besiegen die Intelligenz Kiens, die jedoch ohne Wirklichkeitsgefühl ist. Die Figuren betrachten ihre Welten als die einzig möglichen, ihre Verwendung der Sprache wird als verlogen und heuchlerisch entlarvt. Die tiefe Verbindung von Sprache und Welt existiert nicht mehr: Peter Kiens Besessenheit von den Büchern und dem Wissen, das sie enthalten und bewahren, erlaubt ihm nicht, die Fülle des Lebens zu begreifen. Das Wort wird in der Starrheit der Schrift als seinem Zufluchtsort begriffen. Zusammen mit den akustischen Masken, d.h. der ganz eigentümlichen Art des Sprechens im Dialog (Wortschatz, Tonhöhe, Geschwindigkeit und Rhythmus des Sprechens), bestimmt die Schrift das menschliche Sprachverhalten, die Sprache wird bloßgelegt. Die Bücher geben einer dystopischen Zukunft, die das Symbol des gesellschaftlichen Verfalls, der Zerstörung der Wirklichkeit und des Individuums ist, eine

ästhetische Form, in der es keinen Kontakt mehr zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart gibt.

Um die Rolle und die Bedeutung der Sprache im Roman zu begreifen, wird die Sprechweise dreier Figuren untersucht, die in diesem Zusammenhang als exemplarisch gelten können: Peter Kien, Therese und der Gorilla.

### *1.1. Die Sprache Peter Kiens und Thereses*

Protagonisten des ersten Romanteils sind die Figuren Peter Kien und seine Frau Therese. Peter Kien, der über eine ungeheure Bibliothek und ein ebenso unermessliches Wissen verfügt, drückt sich durch die wissenschaftliche Sprache seiner Studien aus, hat aber die Alltagssprache verlernt und ist so nicht mehr in der Lage, mit seinen Mitmenschen zu kommunizieren. Ist die Sprechweise Manifestation der Seinsweise, erweist sich Peter Kien als Symbol des modernen gespaltenen Ich. In den Reden, die er mit sich selbst, mit seiner Frau oder seinen Büchern führt, spricht er eine gehobene Sprache, die aber mit seinen Halluzinationen beladen ist (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 96-102, 319-24). In ihm sieht man die Diskrepanz und die Widersprüchlichkeit zwischen Handlungen und Worten: Trotz seines umfangreichen Wortschatzes kann er die Wirklichkeit nicht abbilden. Das, was er sagt, steht immer im Gegensatz zu dem, was in der Wirklichkeit geschieht. Er macht sich nichts daraus, dass die Wirklichkeit mit der Welt seiner Phantasie nicht übereinstimmt. Sein Sprachverhalten stößt auf die einfache, minimale Sprechweise Thereses, die sich durch Stereotypen, Gemeinplätze, Redewendungen und rhetorische Fragen ausdrückt, die nichts anders als sprachliche Manifestationen einer Weltansicht sind, die von der Unfähigkeit zur Kommunikation und der absoluten Gleichgültigkeit gegenüber der Umgebung und den Mitmenschen charakterisiert wird: "Aus den Zeitungsannoncen, ihrer einzigen Lektüre, kannte Therese verschiedene schöne Wendungen, die sie in aufgeregten Stunden oder nach schwerwiegenden Entschlüssen in ihre Gedanken einflocht. Solche Worte übten eine beruhigende Wirkung auf sie aus." (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 66).

Die Sprache der Philologie und die Sprache der Sprichwörter-Wirklichkeit lassen Kien und Therese sich scheinbar miteinander unterhalten. Es scheint, sie hätten einander etwas zu sagen, jedoch können Kien und Therese die Sprache der Anderen ohne das Wissen über ein

gemeinsames menschliches Handeln nicht richtig deuten: Da Sprache und Lebensform zusammenhängen, bleibt die Sprache unverständlich und das Leben unerträglich, wenn eine Spaltung zwischen den beiden entsteht. Die Sprache Kiens wird nicht richtig verstanden, er hat ein anderes Weltbild, das von einer Änderung der Weltordnung charakterisiert ist. Seine Sprache, seine Logik und Grammatik sind von der Wissenschaft geprägt, seine Lebensform lässt keinen Kontakt zu seinen Mitmenschen zu: Er lebt keine soziale Wirklichkeit (nach Wittgenstein ist die Lebensform die soziale Voraussetzung der Sprache, Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* § 241), seine Welt ist versteinert, die erstarrten Regeln seiner Mythologie ändern sich nicht mit der Zeit. Die Dialoge zwischen Peter Kien und Therese zeigen die Unsicherheit über die eigene Identität, den Ich-Verlust und eine leere Selbstbehauptung der Figuren.

## 1.2. *Die Sprache des Gorillas und Die Stimmen von Marrakesch*

Im Bezug auf das Thema Sprache ist die Sprechweise jeder Figur des Romans interessant, aber die interessanteste ist wahrscheinlich die des Gorillas, einer seltsamen Figur, die der erste Patient von Georges Kien, Peter Kiens Bruder, ist. Es geht um einen Menschen, der sich so tierisch verhält, dass er mit einem Gorilla verglichen wird. Er scheint eine uralte, mythische Figur zu sein, die eine eigene Sprache erfindet. Letztere besteht aus Lauten, denen in jedem Gespräch eine jeweils neue Bedeutung zukommt. Georges will über die Sprache des Gorillas eine Abhandlung (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 441) schreiben, jedoch kann man sie nicht Sprache nennen, denn sie hat keine Wörter und keine Syntax. Diese Sprechweise weist aber auf den magischen Gebrauch der Sprache, der Ursprache hin. Das Zimmer des Gorillas und seine Sekretärin machen seine Welt aus: Die Sekretärin kann seine Sprache verstehen und benutzt sie anders als er, steht aber im Bann ihrer magischen Wirkung. Jede seiner Benennungen, jeder Laut, jedes Wort scheint unwiederholbar zu sein, die Sprache ist gewaltig, leidenschaftlich, besitzt einen ungeheuren Sinn und einen höheren Wert:

Ein angekleideter Gorilla trat vor, streckte die langen Arme aus, legte sie auf die Schultern des Arztes und begrüßte ihn in einer fremden Sprache. [...] Seine Gebärden waren roh, aber verständlich und einladend. Über die Sprache zerbrach

sich der Arzt den Kopf. [...] Georges war jedes Wort neu [...] Die Sekretärin verstand ihren Herren. Sie antwortete ihm in ähnlichen Worten. Er sprach stärker, mehr aus der Tiefe, hinter seinen Lauten lauerten Affekte. [...] Wenn der Gorilla nur wieder sprach! [...] Jeder Silbe, die er hervorstieß, entsprach eine bestimmte Bewegung. [...] Vom ganzen Körper erzeugt und begleitet, tönte kein Laut als gleichgültig. (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 438-39)

Was kann mit dieser Sprache ausgedrückt werden? Leidenschaften? Mythen? Eine schöpferische Kraft? Warum ist diese Sprache so merkwürdig und einzigartig? Sie scheint an eine universelle, ursprüngliche Sprache zu erinnern: In ihrer Sinnlichkeit scheint sie Canettis Gedanken zu konkretisieren, die er etwa dreißig Jahre später im Laufe seiner Reise in die marokkanische Stadt aufschreibt. Dort erlebt er das Fremde, das von ihm verschiedene, vor allem durch das Hören einer Sprache, des Arabischen, die er nicht beherrscht:

Ist es die Sprache, die ich dort nicht verstand, und die sich nun allmählich in mir übersetzen muß? Da waren Ereignisse, Bilder, Leute, deren Sinn erst in einem *entsteht*; die durch Worte weder aufgenommen noch beschnitten wurden, die jenseits von Worten, tiefer und mehrdeutiger sind als diese.

Ich träume von einem Mann, der die Sprachen der Erde verlernt, bis er in keinem Lande mehr versteht, was gesagt wird. (Canetti, *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* 21 f.)

Solche Überlegungen, die Canetti im Kapitel *Die Rufe des Blinden* darstellt, greifen auf den Gorilla und seine erfundene Sprache zurück: Canetti zweifelt an der Ausdruckskraft der Sprache, an ihrer Fähigkeit, das Erlebte in seinem Ganzen wiederzugeben. Der Gorilla hat die Sprache der Menschen verlernt, er hat schon einen Punkt erreicht, an dem er versteht, was gesagt wird, jedoch seine eigene Sprache und seine Welt erfunden hat. Canetti fährt in *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* mit seinen Reflexionen über die Sprache fort:

Was ist in der Sprache? Was verdeckt sie? Was nimmt sie einem weg? Ich habe während der Wochen, die ich in Marokko verbrachte, weder Arabisch noch eine der Berbersprachen zu erlernen versucht. Ich wollte nichts von der Kraft der fremdartigen Rufe verlieren. Ich wollte von den Lauten so betroffen werden, wie es an ihnen selbst liegt, und nicht durch unzulängliches und künstliches Wissen abschwächen [...]. (Canetti, *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* 21 f.)

Der Tier-Mensch Gorilla stellt in seiner selbst kreierten Sprache eine Variante der Sprachauffassung Mauthners dar. Er ist durch die sinnliche Erfahrung mit der Wirklichkeit verbunden (sensualistische Sprache), jedoch schafft er keine objektive Widerspiegelung der Welt. Alles, was durch die und in der Sprache geschieht und sich zeigt, ist unauflöslich mit einer Erkenntnisoperation verbunden, die die wahre Realität des Menschen um jeden Preis entziffern will. Die Verzerrung der Wörter, der Sätze, der Sprache im Sprachverhalten der Figuren hat die forschende Funktion der sozialen Strukturen. Die Welt, die auseinandergebrochen ist, kann nur in ihrer Verwandlung, in ihrem Werden erzählt werden. Im Vergleich zum modernen, gespaltenen Ich ist der Gorilla eine Art Held: Er ist ein absoluter Außenseiter, der die die Welt regierenden Regeln nicht wahrnehmen und somit nicht akzeptieren kann. Er handelt nicht nach ihnen, er baut sich sein eigenes System auf und ist so dem modernen Menschen entgegengesetzt, welcher nicht mehr im Zentrum der Welt ist, sondern als ein in größere Strukturen eingebettetes Wesen begriffen wird. Solche Strukturen werden von Regeln bestimmt, die die menschliche Lebensform und somit die Sprache mitbestimmen. Nach dieser sprachlichen Welt zu fragen, bedeutet auch, Fragen nach dem menschlichen Sein und Handeln in der Sprache zu stellen. Der Versuch des Gorillas verkörpert die Utopie einer neuen Sprache als Antizipation eines Lebens, in dem harmonische Übereinstimmung zwischen Welt, Sprache und Menschen herrscht. Es ist die gleiche Utopie, die Canetti durch die Straßen von Marrakesch begleitet. In diesem Reisebericht erzählt Canetti von einem Land nicht anhand seiner Orte, wie es traditionell in der Reiseliteratur geschieht, sondern durch die Individuen und ihre Sprache. In der Beschreibung seiner Treffen mit Menschen erzählt er auch von den Lauten dieser Begegnungen, von den akustischen Masken, die uns diese fremde, exotische Welt erkennen lassen. Alles geschieht in der Sprache: Auch wenn sie Menschenverräterin ist, bildet sie die einzige Möglichkeit, die verloren gegangene ursprüngliche Einheit von Wort und Wirklichkeit wiederzugeben. Die Sprache ist das Mittel, zum Menschen, zur Vielfalt des Lebens zu gelangen. Wie im ersten Teil seiner Autobiographie *Die gerettete Zunge* wird die Sprache auch in diesem Zusammenhang gehört, gelesen und geschrieben als Kommunikationsmittel. Der Wandel im menschlichen Leben geschieht durch die Formen des Sprechens, seine Welterfahrungen sind zunächst Spracherfahrungen.



## 2. Die Idee von Literatur

*Die Blendung* stellt durch eine kämpferische und schneidende Sprache eine besondere Idee von Literatur dar. Canetti denkt, dass es illusorisch ist, zu glauben, dass nur die literarischen Werke die Idee und das Bild einer Sprache bestimmen. Die Literatur spielt eine sehr wichtige Rolle in der Formation einer Sprache, das ist unbestritten, aber wenn man wie Canetti in einer anderen Sprache als der Muttersprache lebt und schreibt, bemerkt man sofort, dass man sich von den Worten nicht befreien kann, von den einzelnen Worten, deren Kraft und Energie wir spüren. In einer Epoche, die von dem Rätsel und der Undurchsichtigkeit der Ereignisse charakterisiert wird, symbolisieren die Worte das Leben selbst und die Fähigkeit zum Überleben. Im Roman findet man ironische Reflexionen über die verbreitete Idee von Literatur in der damaligen Zeit, die den Weg zu einem Nachdenken über deren Definition und Rolle eröffnen: Es geht hauptsächlich um die Reflexionen der zwei Brüder Kien über die Gattung des Romans und dann um einige Sätze, die Peter Kien der Dichtung in einem Gespräch mit Therese widmet: "Mit einem Gedicht läßt sich alles am besten sagen. Gedichte passen in jede Situation. Sie nennen das Ding bei seinem umständlichsten Namen und man versteht sie doch" (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 56).

Der Roman wird im ersten Teil als eine minderwertige Gattung bestimmt: Als Peter Kien das Verhalten Thereses seinen Büchern gegenüber betrachtet (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 42), will er sie belohnen und ihr ein Buch schenken. Unter seinen unzähligen Büchern wählt er einen Roman aus seiner Jugend aus, der sich in einem schlechten Zustand befindet. Er glaubt, dass der Roman die einzige Gattung ist, die Therese mit ihrem gesellschaftlichen Hintergrund und ihre Bildung verstehen kann:

Richtig, er hatte ihr ein Buch versprochen. Für sie kam bloß ein Roman in Betracht. Nur wird von Romanen keinen Geist fett. Den Genuß, den sie vielleicht bieten, überzählt man sehr: sie zersetzen den besten Charakter. Man lernt sich in allerlei Menschen einfühlen. Am vielen Hin und Her gewinnt man Geschmack. Man löst sich in die Figuren auf, die einem gefallen. Jeder Standpunkt wird begreiflich. [...] Romane sind Keile, die ein schreibender Schauspieler in die geschlossene Person seiner Leser treibt. Je besser er Keil und Widerstand berechnet, um so gespaltener läßt er die Person zurück. Romane müßten vom Staat verboten sein. (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 41 f.)

Nach Kien ist der Roman eine minderwertige Gattung, da er eine Beziehung unter Menschen voraussetzt, die für ihn unmöglich ist. Was Canetti in diesem Zitat auch kritisiert, ist das bisherige Verhältnis zwischen Schriftsteller und Leser und somit die Idee von Literatur seiner Zeit. Der Roman der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts zeigt sich als eine entscheidend neue Gattung, die durch das Experimentieren mit neuen Ausdrucksformen charakterisiert wird. Solche Ausdrucksformen zielen darauf ab, die Unruhe und die Sinnlichkeit des modernen Menschen zu beschreiben, der Opfer einer totalen Krise ist und der Möglichkeit beraubt wird, er selbst zu werden und objektiv die Wirklichkeit zu erkennen. Dieser neue Roman ist das Ergebnis eines langen Verwandlungsprozesses, ausgehend vom Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts. Die Figur ist nicht mehr das Zentrum der Erzählung und die chronologische Reihenfolge wird zugunsten des *stream of consciousness*, der freien indirekten Rede usw. aufgegeben. In dieser umwälzenden Epoche, denkt man an Wien der Jahrhundertwende, in der Canetti lebte und zuerst mit diesen Ideen in Kontakt kam, dann in der Zwischenkriegszeit sind beliebte Themen des Romans die schmerzende Unvollkommenheit des Menschen und seines Zustandes von Gefangenschaft in dieser Welt (Kafka), der Verfall der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft (Mann, Musil), die Unmöglichkeit, ein einziges und eindeutiges Bild der Wirklichkeit zu geben. Nach Canetti sind Romane immer schön, sie symbolisieren das Neue, den Fortschritt, das Werden. Wer einen Roman verstehen möchte, der sollte sich nicht nur auf die erzählte Geschichte konzentrieren, sondern auch den Sinn dieser Geschichte begreifen. Im dritten Teil des Romans erzählt der Bruder, Georges Kien, der seine Laufbahn als Frauenarzt begann, von der Rolle, die Romane in seinem Leben gespielt haben:

In Romanen stand immer dasselbe. Früher hatte er mit Leidenschaft gelesen und an neuen Wendungen alter Sätze, die er schon für unveränderlich, farblos, abgegriffen und nichtssagend hielt, großes Vergnügen gefunden. Damals bedeutete ihm die Sprache wenig. Er forderte von ihr akademische Richtigkeit; die besten Romane waren die, in denen die Menschen am gewählten sprachen. Wer sich so ausdrücken konnte wie alle anderen Schreiber vor ihm, galt als legitimer Nachfolger. Eines solchen Aufgabe bestand darin, die zackige, schmerzliche, beißende Vielgestalt des Lebens, das einen umgab, auf eine glatte Papierebene zu bringen, über die es sich rasch und angenehm hinweglas. (Canetti, *Die Blendung* 435-36)

Solche Ideen über die Gattung des Romans verbinden sich mit dem Kapitel des Reiseberichtes, *Erzähler und Schreiber*, und dem Essay *Der Beruf des Dichters*. In *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* denkt Canetti über die westliche Idee von Literatur nach, die unauflöslich mit der Schrift verbunden ist und sich in der Person der Schreiber verkörpert. Dagegen ist er fasziniert von der evozierenden Kraft der Sprache der Erzähler:

Am meisten Zulauf haben die Erzähler. Um sie bilden sich die dichtesten und auch die beständigsten Kreise von Menschen, [...] sie hängen fasziniert an Worten und Gesten des Erzählers [...]. Ich verstand nichts und doch blieb ich in ihrer Hörweite immer gleich gebannt stehen. Es waren Worte ohne jede Bedeutung für mich, mit Wucht und Feuer hervorgestoßen. [...] Sie bleiben für mich eine Enklave alten und unberührten Lebens. Ihre Sprache war ihnen so wichtig wie mir meine. Worte waren ihre Nahrung und sie ließen sich von niemand dazu verführen, sie gegen eine bessere Nahrung zu vertauschen. (Canetti, *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* 66 f.)

Durch die erzählerische Plastik (Durzak, *Elias Canetti*; Görbert 14-19) dieser vierzehn Kapitel, die miteinander nichts zu tun haben, wird das Schreiben Canettis, das sich außerhalb der metaphorischen Ebene vollzieht, der Ort einer lebendigen Aneignung und einer Erkenntnis der Realität in all ihren Aspekten (Agard 177). Im Versuch, diese Realität als gegeben zu beschreiben, wird dieses Schreiben ein Prozess der Verwandlung, eine ständige dynamische Bewegung durch ein unendliches Spiel von Aufschüben und Veränderungen. Wenn die Verwandlung dem Subjekt auf einem individuellen Niveau erlaubt, mit allen Leistungsfähigkeiten des menschlichen Lebens zu experimentieren, erlaubt sie auch die Bewahrung des Gedächtnisses der Menschheit in ihrer Verschiedenheit (Hanuschek 99). Die stilistischen, rhetorischen und erzählerischen Mittel tragen zum Veranschaulichen, zum Hervorbringen dieser Verschiedenheit bei. Die herrschende Mehrsprachigkeit der marokkanischen verkörpert einen Übersetzungsprozess von einer Kultur zu einer anderen.



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# ‘Peopling the World’: from Scheherazade to Rushdie’s *Nights*

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It is a marvellous journey. It resonates with voices, music, noises from resplendent metropolises and with the silence of not very uninhabited deserts. It is, undoubtedly, at the often unspoken source of innumerable forms of textualities. It is a magmatic, outgrowing world collection, whose boundaries remain and are to remain unsteady, and fruitfully so. As an excellent myth-making and myth-grinding machine (see Todorov 2006), possibly known as *Alf Layla wa Layla*, *The Arabian Nights*, or *One Thousand and One Nights* (among other titles and languages) they testify to the fact that, as Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum have recently stated, “the European and Arabic worlds are not easily separable, but overlap and intersect culturally and intellectually” (12).

The story of ‘the story’ is long and lost in the midst of unrecorded oral transmissions and later written perambulations in and out of many canons. As an uncollected conglomerate of very popular tales, it seems to have been born somewhere in Persia as an appropriation of the *Hasar Afsana* (The thousand stories) in the Arabic-speaking world, and it was already referred to in the tenth century as an improper collection of tall tales, as useless, worthless trinkets, possibly told by women<sup>1</sup>. Since their very beginning, even before they were turned into a written collection probably in fourteenth-century Syria, the fascination of *The Nights* has spread across worlds and languages, conspicuously disorienting readers in what Marina Warner has described as its “extravagant acrobatics” (2012: 9). Sandra Naddaff dedicates a chapter to the *Nights* in a collective

attempt at devising a history of ‘World Literature.’ In her view, which I support,

*Alf Layla wa Layla...* reflects on fundamental questions about the nature of narrative, it is equally a work that speaks directly to the potential of a foundational literary text fearlessly to cross borders and boundaries of all sorts: generic, formal, linguistic, and national. Perhaps no other work of world literature holds up as clear a mirror to the way a text can simultaneously be identified wholly with a literary culture and yet circulate well beyond that culture, than does this foundational text of Arabic narrative. (in D’Haen, Damrosch, Kadir 487)

I intend to briefly follow some of the paths this foundational ‘item’ has taken across Arabic and European languages, and later focus on the frame/d woman, Scheherazade, whose story is indeed a fairy tale of its own, travelling along its own cross-cultural routes, in and out of ever changing collected and translated versions of European *Nights*. I will later follow the trickster woman towards a contemporary rendition of the not-very-original *Alf Layla* in *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, a truly “chaosmotic” (Deleuze 1992) novel Salman Rushdie dedicated to remoulding that matrix text and icon. In this 2015 text, in his usual complex and irreverent style, Rushdie refashions Scheherazade’s voice and presence and uses the tradition of the *Nights* to merge updated circulatory materials which range from Ibn Rushd to millennial New York and the world of the *jinni*. While a continuous presence in Rushdie’s writing, these *Nights* seem innovative in their ending with a reassuring shift away from programmatic open-endedness, with a collective chorus who brush chaos off page and acknowledge the “extravagant” circulation of stories set in a securely distant past, but also distance them away from the seductive power of a tricky woman narrator or ‘heroine.’

### 1. Contact Zones

It is well known that it was Francois Galland who ‘patented’ the *Nights* by producing a splendidly successful enterprise which seemed to cater for the needs of Enlightenment Europe, which wanted and invented an East it could phantasize about. His selection, translation, inception of stories brought to light twelve volumes through which he ‘infected’ the old continent with

the seeds of another dreamlike world, deriving from the Lebanon, Persia, Egypt, and many other geographical and linguistic sources. As a perfect example of Said's orientalism (1978), Galland's 1704-1717 edition was an amazing feat of thrilling invention, a recreation which was still being recommended in late nineteenth-century Britain by enthusiasts such as W. H. Henley:

He that has the book of the Thousand Nights and a Night has Hashisch-made-words for life. Gallant, subtle, refined, intense, humorous, obscene, here is the Arab intelligence drunk with conception. It is a vast extravaganza of passion in action and picarooning farce and material splendour run mad. (in Caracciolo, Hassenstab 14)

At least partially paradoxically, Galland's *Mille et une nuits* found their immediate way towards Britain where they were hastily translated and published in a Grub Street cheap edition that ran for many decades and familiarized the British readership with the chosen title of *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*. Endowed with an unmatched reservoir of stories and morals, alive with both repetitive circular patterns and continuous unexpected coups de théâtre, these were indeed both sensuously titillating and yet considered fit (or fitted) to enter the nursery, and thus the practice of publishing single stories picked out from the collection became widespread from the beginning of the eighteenth century. By mid-century, *The Nights* were truly everywhere, their twists and turns as swift and mobile as the carpets they so often featured, with their captivating jinn world and their shadowy harems alive with splendid, yet or maybe *because* eroticized, intelligent creatures.

In the same decades *The Nights* were also continuously attacked, as much as some genres of novel writing and reading, due to their alleged production of similar physiological reactions. In response to accusations of being nothing but a disaggregate collection tainted by absurd impropriety, during the Victorian age different approaches to the tales came to the fore and became predominant: on the one hand, Edward Lane's bowdlerized *Nights*, on the other, Richard Burton's famed version of the *Nights* which took the English-speaking world by storm<sup>2</sup>. Lane's plan leads him in his 1830-1840 serialized edition to exorcize what he deems excessive in the (written and oral) text, adopting a style Stephen Arata defines as "dryasdustiness" (no page), an equally verbose and grandiose magniloquence even imbued with

illogical Latinisms (see Irwin 24). His intention was that of purging the *Nights* from their overtly incantatory and sexualized features and instead providing an informed, often irritatingly detailed account of the mores of Egyptians. Lane's was a scholarly, bowdlerized entertainment patently suitable for prude Victorians.

But Victorians had other tastes too, and those appetites were whetted by Sir Richard Burton. Another very eminent Victorian indeed, Burton was the most splendid example of nineteenth-century explorers, a polyglot with a passion for 'authentic' encounters with the many cultures whose languages he famously mastered<sup>3</sup>. His version of *The Arabian Nights* stood Lane's early Victorian edition on its head. Where Lane had decided to suppress, refine, and recalibrate his source material, Burton devised a new title which set his agenda and style quite clearly: the ten volumes of his *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Now Entitled The Book of The Thousand Nights and a Night* were published between 1885-1888 and eventually other 6 volumes joined the already ponderous collection.

Caracciolo suggests that Burton's *Thousand Nights and One Night* may possibly surfeit their readers "in [their] inexhaustible plenitude ... [but that nevertheless that plenitude] hides this secret, whose key is encoded in the calligraphic pattern"<sup>4</sup>. In this vertiginous interplay between detailed plenitude and shaded mystery, Burton unfolds an intoxicating example of cultural misunderstanding. As perfect cipher of the still aporistic relation between the East and its 'rest,' in Burton's famous version the frame heroine Scheherazade still tells her tales, and her sister Dinarzade never fails to demand a new story, and to be offered hundreds. If there is any continuity in the adaptations and appropriations mentioned so far, this duo may possibly be counted as the only pivotal feature. Yet, they were soon to be treated otherwise.

## 2. Out of the Frame

The late Victorians tended to further bowdlerize and readapt Burton's philologically unbeatable edition, but also to look back on Galland's classical editions, with the specific intention of selecting stories for the sake of the young, namely girls<sup>5</sup>. For that reason, Andrew Lang – a very well-known anthropologist and scholar of myth – decided to omit what he

debatably deemed “only suitable for Arabs and old gentlemen” (Lang 86), and also reduced the presence of the female narrator and trickster. Smart and brave as she is in the Arab and European versions of previous times, Scheherazade the trickster and saviour cedes her place and is completely exorcised by the only woman editor so far, E. Dixon. Since her *Fairy Tales and More Fairy Tales from the Arabian Nights* (1893 and 1895) were openly addressed to an audience made of “virginibus puerisque” (title page), it seems that the unambiguous love-making frame was contemptuously eliminated for the sake of propriety. Another example of this very complex history of recalibrations and revelatory, functional misunderstandings.

Peter Caracciolo follows the paths of inclusion and excision of Scheherazade in the twentieth century. In his survey, he sees the celebration of her feat of enchantment in the magnificent conjoined artistry of Edmund Dulac’s and Laurence Housman’s *Stories from the Arabian Nights* (1907), which to him provided “proto-suffragettes” with very captivating images and ideas.

... while Housman's introduction begins by celebrating Scheherazade's achievement as 'splendid and memorable' (p. iii), he concludes by shocking his reader into the terrifying realisation that, even as she succeeds in gaining yet another stay of execution, so nightly must Scheherazade 'share ... the pillow of a homicidal maniac' (p. viii). This challenging introduction was dropped from the cheap reprints of the 1907 book... (in Caracciolo, Hassenstab 41)

Housman grants Scheherazade her due, and suggests how her thousand nights and hundreds of stories could well be read as a “great act of statesmanship,” a powerful intimation of what “resourceful, witty women can accomplish, given the opportunity of doing so, and possibly without the impending danger of execution as trigger” (Caracciolo, Hassenstab 4). In the short story which parodies the *Nights*, Edgar Allan Poe had his excessively-skilled Scheherazade sentenced to death, accused of lying because she had inserted in her tales the amazing – thus unbelievable to the ‘eastern’ ears of a bored Shahriyar – verities of nineteenth-century Western technological innovations (1845). Wit will out, and once out, it proves radically dangerous and in need of exorcism, no matter how grotesquely parodic.

In more contemporary years, Fatema Mernissi’s personal excursus

along the routes of the Westernization of Scheherazade (2001) further portrays the topical and intoxicating proliferation of *Nights* and tricky storytellers alike. Already well known for her work on the harem as site of contending, competing cultural construction, Mernissi sets on a different journey along the axes of hallucinated misconceptions. In the misunderstandings related to the *loci* of the *Arabian Nights*, she seems to see a realization of the words – and images – made hashish Henley had referred to and longed for when writing on his own contemporary *Nights*. She finds especially in the pictorial European tradition inventing/depicting the ‘Orient’ a banalizing eroticization and diminution of Scheherazade’s – and Islamic women’s more in general – intellectual skills. In her view, the trickster heroine should be taken to embody mental incantatory powers, rather than a less articulate sexual expertise. Her voice, her brain, her bravery, make the Persian/Arabic woman of the *Nights* succeed in her goal of personal and collective (gendered) salvation. In a version she edited in 2013, the acclaimed Lebanese writer Hanan Al-Shayk introduces her choices from the traditional collections as a political homage to a text – plural and impervious to fixity as it is – which in her view politically allows space for women and/at the margin:

[A]s a female Arab writer my real enchantment was the discovery that women in those forgotten ancient societies were far from passive and fearful; they showed their strong will and intelligence and wit, all the time recognising that their behaviour was the second nature of the weak and oppressed. (xv)

### 3. *Glittering Global Nights*

It is a vast extravaganza of passion in action and picarooning farce  
and material splendour run mad. (Henley 208)

This section pivots on a very recent roman-à-clef by a celebrity-author, Salman Rushdie, who chooses to weave together present and past *One Thousand and One Nights*, as well as numbers of other literary and cultural texts, in a glittering witty pastiche, a “temporal contact zone” (Byatt) and a contested terrain which openly reuses the *Nights* tradition and makes it respond to contemporary global issues and anxieties. In the text, Scheherazade is absent, her role as narrator is taken over first by Ibn Rushd/

Averroè, later by the ‘people’, the Duniazat. I contend that this novel may well be taken as a contemporary version of Henley’s “extravaganza,” and that its “material splendour” provides a locus for an engaging and humorous experiment in cultural and narrative acrobatics.

Rushdie is certainly a master storyteller, who has often counted on and recounted his syncretic version of the cultural encounters of East and West, North and South, in his personal declension of the debated arena of world literature.<sup>6</sup> His most widely acclaimed novels, namely *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses* (1981, 1988), are textual palimpsests which adopt narrative linearity *and* replication, lexical repetition *and* innovation, tradition *and* the unexpected as their magmatic, intertextual, multilingual cipher. In many senses, although with varying results and growingly lukewarm critical reception, Rushdie seems to take on the role of Scheherazade, and change it, or mutate into her. In *Midnight’s Children* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), he had already openly traced a visible lineage from the *One Thousand and One Nights* of his personal traditions.

I think the old stories, Western as well as Eastern, have enormous power, and I like the modernity of many of them. In the Panchatantra fables, for example, the bad guys — the sneaky, wily guys — often win. Much more interesting than Aesop’s homilies to behave well and not be greedy. The influence isn’t that direct — it’s more like a background music against which I set my own accounts of human beings in the world. (Bamzai no page)

In his 2015 *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, readers are offered no longer a sea, but an even more ambitious sky of stories, tall tales indeed which an impatient reviewer simply defines “a tedious disappointment, despite his efforts to write the jinns of Scheherazade’s *One Thousand and One Nights* — the numerical equivalent of his novel’s title — into a loud pop-culture Hollywood blockbuster like *Age of Ultron*” (*The Asian Age* no page). Indeed, an obsession with the numerical esoteric abounds in this new encyclopedic, at times hilariously grotesque, concoction à la Rushdie. The Indo-Anglian writer<sup>7</sup> prefaces his novel with a trio of signifying epigraphs, which range from a visual reference to Goya’s monsters of reason, to a translation of the Hungarian Gyla Krudy’s *Sindbad* into English by George Szirtes. On the same epigraph page, Italo Calvino’s words resonate with the fantastic distance set forth in *I nostri antenati*, where

the Italian master of storytelling “conjures up” a novel from the future. Last, but evidently not least, Rushdie chooses a straightforward quotation from *The Thousand Nights and One Nights*. Quite surreptitiously, it refers to one of the thousand occasions on which Scheherazade, after complying with her wifely duties, her storytelling done, “fell silent, discreetly” (Rushdie 2015: 9). Programmatically, this adaptation of the *Nights* seems to take its cue from the silence of its mistress-narrator.

Wading through spatial and chronological gaps, the unnamed plural narrators, a postmodern tongue-in-cheek version of a Greek tragic chorus, visibly intervene to impart information and reassure readers from the very beginning. As often is the case with Rushdie, the narration purports to be a truthful rendition of accountable facts seen from a future, happier, world. Those facts are the ‘history’ of the war of the worlds, happening ‘now,’ on the environmentally deranged and extremely unsafe planet of the extreme contemporary. A thousand years back in the past, humans were visited on by the shadowy, unpredictable, irresponsible genies/jinns who inhabit the *Nights*.

Very little is known, though much has been written, about the true nature of the jinn, the creatures made of smokeless fire. Whether they are good or evil, devilish or benign, such questions are hotly disputed... their sense of time differs radically from that of human beings.... These amorphous creatures sometimes slide into human beings through the ears, nose or eyes, and occupy those bodies for a while, discarding them when they tire of them. The occupied human beings, regrettably, do not survive. (Rushdie 11)

These *Nights* thus testify to a time of crisis, and ironically display global strangenesses (not so inconceivable in our contemporary ‘extreme’ history) which are made to recede into a faraway, comfortable distance.

This is the story of a jinnia... known as the lightning Princess... It is also the tale of many other jinn... and of the time of crisis, the time-out-of-joint which we call the time of the strangenesses, which lasted two years, eight months and twenty-eight nights, which is to say, one thousand nights and one more. And yes, we have lived another thousand years since those days, but we are all forever changed by that time. (Rushdie 15)

The jinnia aligns with the century-old history and tradition of the *Nights*, but she is also posited as an impatient listener, requesting new



stories from none other than Ibn Rushd, better known in the European tradition as the Andalusian philosopher Averroes. Exiled from his Cordoba in 1195, Ibn Rushd<sup>8</sup> took refuge in Lucena, where the first chapter of the book is set. There he falls 'prey' to the loving caresses of a young girl, Dunia, who obviously mirrors Scheherazade's younger sister, Dunyazad. Hers is the voice that always asks for still another story in most of the versions of the *Nights*. Rushdie has his narrators recount the incantation, which begins like the vertiginous fairytale it eventually proves to be while bearing a mockingly pedantic tone:

There was a Persian book called *Hazar Afsaneh*, or *One Thousand Stories*, which had been translated into Arabic. In the Arabic version there were fewer than one thousand stories but the action was spread over one thousands nights, or because round numbers were ugly, one thousand nights and one night more. ... but for its technical beauty, the way stories were enfolded within other stories and contained, folded within themselves, yet other stories, so that the story became a true mirror of life, Ibn Rushd thought, in which all our stories contain the stories of others and are themselves contained within larger, grander narratives, the histories of our families, or homelands, or beliefs. More beautiful even than the stories within stories was the story of the storyteller, a princess called Shahrazad or Scheherazade, who told her tales to a murderous husband to prevent herself from being executed. Stories told against death, to civilise a barbarian. And at the foot of the marital bed sat Shahrazad's sister, her perfect audience, asking for one more story, and then one more, and then yet another. From this sister's name Ibn Rushd got the name he bestowed on hordes of babies issuing from his lover Dunia's loins... Dunyazad... the Duniyat, that is, Dunia's tribe, the race of Dunians, the Dunia people, which, being translated, is 'the people of the world'. (Rushdie 22)

The pair live together for the formulaic two years, eight months and twenty-eight days and nights, intent on 'peopling the world' with their physically remarkable offspring:

In the two years, eight months and twenty-eight days and nights that followed, she was pregnant three times and on each occasion brought forth a multiplicity of children, at least seven on each occasion, it would appear, and one occasion eleven, or possibly nineteen, though the records are vague and inexact. All the children inherited her most distinctive feature: they had no earlobes. (Rushdie 23)

Stephanie Jones traces the presence of Dinarzad, or Dunyazad, as a typical trait of "a genealogy of contemporary reworkings of the *Nights*"

(2005: 130). In her view, Scheherazade's sister is often being empowered and released from her marginal (though fundamental in the logic of the frame) position and role as the on-looker and "prompter" (Jones 2005: 130). This is indeed the case with Rushdie's manipulative demanding voice, "always asking for stories, only her Scheherazade was a man, her lover not her brother, and some of his stories could get them both killed if the words were accidentally to escape... he was a sort of anti-Scheherazade... the exact opposite of the storyteller of *The Thousand Nights and One Night*: her stories saved her life, while his put his life in danger." (Rushdie 22).

Instead, Ibn Rushd is rehabilitated and swiftly abandons his jinnia lover and passionate listener. "It is believed that she remained among human beings for a time... but her story became a thing of shadows and mysteries... Nobody noticed or cared that one day she turned sideways and slipped through a slit in the world and returned to Peristan, the other reality, the world of dreams whence the jinn periodically emerge to trouble and bless mankind..." (Rushdie 24) Their brood go forth and prosper in the world, "a family without a place but with family in every place, a village without a location, but winding in and out of every location on the globe, like rootless plants, mosses or lichens or creeping orchids, who must lean upon others". (Rushdie 25)

Eight hundred years later, in the city of New York, "A storm fell upon our ancestors' city like a bomb.... Darkness fell. Before the power died the TV showed images taken from the sky of an immense white spiral wheeling overhead like an invading alien spaceship." (Rushdie 30) From that cataclysmic – and so eerily familiar – event onwards, things go differently, people start floating in the air, lightning strikes and kills unexpectedly, and in-betweenness becomes the rule, while readers follow the adventures of Mr Geronimo, a landscape gardener of Indian ascent, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, one of *Dunia's* children who are "Jewslims Christians. Patchwork types" (Rushdie 45). At the time of the "strangenesses", which obviously last "two years, eight months and twenty-eight nights", chaos ensues, justice is abandoned, murder spreads, terror is set loose on the entire planet. Yet, chaos and inexcusable violence and murder also took very actual place on numerous other occasions, namely the riots which stormed India from December 1992 to January 1993, after which the colonial Bombay was refashioned and translated into Mumbai. To the alert eyes of cosmopolitan Rushdie, history can be more fantastic, and gothic, than

the most fictitious mayhem even he can devise. This time, though, Rushdie suggests the possibility of cooperation and a sense of ethical (rather than ethnic) community.

The seals between the Two Worlds are broken and the dark jinn ride, she said. Your world is in danger and because my children are everywhere I am protecting it. I'm bringing them together, and together we will fight back. (Rushdie 185)

In the war of the worlds of the past, Dunia leads the battle between humans and her in-between children against the malevolent, vicious attacks launched against them by the four Grand Ifrits, tremendously powerful jinns whose only wish is to set up a reign of terror on earth and thus take a revenge on Dunia/the Princess of Lightning. Obviously related to the four knights of the Apocalypse, these four anti-knights roam the world and infiltrate minds, bodies, institutions with rigid schematism and imposed dogmatism. Unsurprisingly, Rushdie dives against his usual great Asian allies, this time portrayed as "Swots" inhabiting the land of A. and not very hardly recognisable:

[They] called themselves the Swots, as if the mere word would earn them the status of true scholars. What the Swots had studied deeply was the art of forbidding things, and in a very short time they had forbidden painting, sculpture, music, theatre, film, journalism, hashish, voting, elections, individualism, disagreement, pleasure, happiness, pool tables, clean-shaven chins (on men), women's faces, women's bodies, women's education, women's sports, women's rights. They would have liked to have forbidden women altogether but even they could see that that was not entirely feasible, so they contented themselves with making women's lives as unpleasant as possible. (Rushdie 238)

Again, history proves more unbelievable than any fairytale-like invention. Dunia rallies together the most jinn-like, freak-like among her descendants, men, women, children, Goya-style superheroes and superheroines, in short "...[God's] bastard brood, the Duniazat... and the curse he laid upon us all is our destiny and our doom: the curse of being out of step with God, ahead of our time or behind it... Of being the chosen people..." (Rushdie 45).

Words and the endless interweaving of stories embedded in and embedding the *Nights* can be devastating weapons, disturbing the order of the world of imagination, entrapping jinns, humans, dead philosophers

(Ibn Rushd and his stark enemy, proto-fundamentalist Ghazali) in an exhilarating Chinese Box Mr Geronimo eventually manages to destroy during his ‘visit’ to Peristan:

There’s a poisoned king here... and a Chinese box. What’s in the box, he asked the spy. It dropped from the king’s hands when he fell... I believe the poison is inside. What sort of poison, said Mr Geronimo. Verbal, said Omar. A fairy king can only be poisoned by the most dreadful and powerful of words. Open the box, Dunia said. (Rushdie 189)

Unmistakably, Rushdie/Ibn Rushd pays his respect to the storytelling tradition of his worlds and plays his typical magical realistic tricks of invention. Scheherazade’s single enchanting voice is silenced indeed, as one of the epigraphs to the novel had aptly anticipated. She disappears in the midst of the inaudible clutter of unending layers of story, in the babelic confusion of voices, tongues, pitches which bifurcate and also eventually return, ghost-like, to inhabit an over-crowded and possibly over-narrated world:

Within the Chinese Box, like layers of rectangular skin, were many other boxes, disappearing into the centre of the enclosed space as if tumbling into an abyss. The outermost layer, the box containing all the other boxes, actually seemed to be alive, and Mr Geronimo wondered with a small shudder of disgust if it, and all that it contained, might actually be made of living, perhaps human, skin. He found it impossible even to think of touching the accursed thing... The six surfaces of the Chinese box were intricately decorated – the word tattooed came to Mr Geronimo’s mind – with images of mountainous landscapes and ornate pavilions by babbling streams. In such boxes, now that contact between the Two Worlds had been re-established, the emperor’s spies sent him detailed and varied accounts of the world below, the human reality, which [king] Shahpal found endlessly fascinating. (Rushdie 192)

While seemingly warning against any excessive proliferation of words,<sup>9</sup> and apparently downplaying narration for the sake of gardening and planting vegetal and human seed, Rushdie frames and reframes his *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* and makes the novel circulate to and fro the communicating vessels of myth, folklore, literature, comics, journalism and political discourse. In the last chapter of the novel, “The Faerie Queene” eventually manages to eliminate all the enemies of

utterly vulnerable humankind and earth, return to her proper dimension, and eradicate the inherent evil that words, stories, fiction represent. At least in part. The unnamed choral narrators are not witnesses in the first person of the amazing events of and before the strangenesses, but retell and listen, again and again, ever after:

*We tell this story still as it has come down to us through many retellings, mouth to ear, ear to mouth, both the story of the poisoned box and the stories it contained, in which the poison was concealed. This is what stories are, experience retold by many tongues to which, sometimes, we give a single name, Homer, Valmiki, Vyasa, Scheherazade. We, for our own part, simply call ourselves 'we'. 'We' are the creature that tells itself stories to understand what sort of creature it is. As they pass down to us the stories lift themselves away from time and place, losing the specificity of their beginnings, but gaining the purity of essences, of being simply themselves. And by extension, or by the same token, as we like to say, though we do not know what the token is or was, these stories become what we know, what we understand, and what we are, or, perhaps we should say, what we have become, or can perhaps be. (Rushdie)*

The story of the treasure chest is as lively and poisonous as the stories it ought to contain and rather lets leak out. Voices travel far and infiltrate slits, material boundaries and cultural imaginaries. If indeed Rushdie's retelling may stand in line with the other entertaining *Nights*, stories, myths encountered so far, it is because it pluralizes and diffuses authorship into that collective authorial presence. To him, readers are obviously implied and implicated listeners, but also, in the case of this novel and of the *One Thousand and One Nights* tradition, they are narrators in charge of a powerful, all-transforming apparatus. Indeed, the story Rushdie's chorus allegedly comment on is also the lacunous and fascinating story of the world:

Thus is how it has come down to us, a millennium later, as history infused with and perhaps overwhelmed by legend. This is how we think of it now, as if it were a fallible memory, or a dream of the remote past. If it's untrue, or partly untrue, if made-up stories have been introduced into the record, it's too late to do anything about it. This is the story of our ancestors as we choose to tell it, and so, of course, it's our story too. (Rushdie 31)

In this novel, Rushdie repeatedly and openly refers readers back to the *Nights*, using and adapting its many traditions. Rather than featuring an imprisoned woman whose narrative exists and works because she is

under pressure of death, he chooses to let a man, Ibn Rushd, voice out his reverence for crosscultural, global, storytelling. While allegedly making Dunia a powerful and prolific trickster heroine, though, Rushdie also releases his readers from the grip of a Scheherazade to tell this framed story with the plural voice of the Duniyazat, the people of the world. In my view, the collective recollection this ironically entails obscures the possibilities of letting the marginalized voice of Scheherazade or Duniyazade speak back, at least fictitiously, to her fascinated but mastering listener. Yet, it is and might have been her own story too.



- 1 “In 1756 Alexander Russell, resident physician to the English factory in Aleppo, described how oriental men of fashion were lulled to sleep with 'stories told out of the Arabian Nights Entertainments ... which their women were taught to repeat for this purpose'. Patrick Russell's enlarged edition of Aleppo (1794) ... added a chapter on Arabic literature, and in a note on the Nights he testified to their authenticity...” (Caracciolo, Hassenstab 1988: 95).
- 2 Another quasi-professional traveller and self-taught Arabist, Edward William Lane spent a long time in Egypt and in 1836 published an ambitious and very successful *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, which is still in print today.
- 3 Among his many expeditions, his journey in disguise to the Mecca, which might well have cost him his life, transformed him into an international celebrity. It was followed by the equally famous Burton-Speke expedition in search of the sources of the Nile. Burton certainly managed to thrive on his fame, courage and incredible expertise and became one of the most famous translators and anthropologists of his time, eventually ending his career and life as an esteemed and knighted diplomat at Trieste.
- 4 “An intriguing example of bilingual paronomasia, this emblem fuses word and image, letters and geometry with the virtuosity of an ideogram. The inscription KITAB ALF LAYLAH WA LAYLAH is repeated four times in so convoluted a manner that the 'square Kufic' title creates a giddy recession of patterns within patterns; the spokes of a wheel (within a square within another square of script) formed from the quadrupled Arabic 'wa' ('and') assuming at the centre of this maze of letters a kinetic swastika-like unity”. (Caracciolo, Hassenstab xvi)
- 5 “Towards the end of Victoria's reign there was a rising flood of selections and abridgements adapted for young readers. The number of these 'short Arabian Nights' peaked in 1907 and 1908 with half a dozen or more juvenile versions a year” (Caracciolo, Hassenstab 39).
- 6 On this issue, see Damrosch 2013, 2018.
- 7 In a 1997 article, he praises Indian writing in English as an “entry into the order of ‘englishness’... as a heady arrival from the jagged confines of the South Asian subcontinent into the spherical wholeness of the larger world.

- The Indo-Anglian generation is so good precisely because it is ‘too good to fall into the trap of writing nationalistically’” (xv). See Ghandi 1997.
- 8 Rushdie has often narrated how, sensing a lineal vicinity with the Andalusian philosopher, astronomer and physician his father had ‘chosen’ his surname, Rushdie, as a homage to the great commentator of Aristotle and proponent of the unity of the human intellect.
- 9 “And by this time the Chinese box was peeling crazily, and as each layer fell away a new voice told a new tale, none of the tales finished because the ox inevitably found a new story inside unfinished one... there could be no meaning in such an environment, only absurdity, the unmeaningness.” (Rushdie, *Two Years* 208).





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# “There are more than two options in this world”: The Challenge of Liminality in Kirsty Logan’s *The Gracekeepers*

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## *Introduction*

In the last few decades, an increasing interest in fantasy has characterised not only literature, fiction in particular, but also the cinema, television, and the visual arts, while an unprecedented body of scholarly criticism has tried to clear the genre from centuries-old academic ostracism. Recent scholarship has also helped to better understand that, far from representing an escape from reality, fantasy literature, as Mark Fabrizi aptly puts it, “tends to ask the ‘big’ questions of life [such as] the nature of good and evil, universal morality, the afterlife, heroism and the quality of one’s character, the role of the individual in society, and the importance of cultural diversity” (Fabrizi 1). Some of these issues are central to Kirsty Logan’s much acclaimed debut novel, *The Gracekeepers* (2015),<sup>1</sup> a dystopia whose imaginary world patently draws inspiration on the author’s home landscapes, the Scottish islands and seacoast that provide the setting for most of her fiction, from the tales in *A Portable Shelter* (2015), to her recently published second novel, *The Gloaming* (2018)<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the fantastic side of the story owes much to Celtic myths and folklore. This paper intends to discuss the manifold symbolism of the novel interpreting it as an allegory of contemporary times. After a synopsis of the plot, the analysis will first take into account the spatial dimension, in which the concept of liminality plays a key role. It will then go on to show that, far from being confined to space, the idea of the ‘liminal’ actually permeates

the novel at different levels, engaging the reader in a thorough rethinking of boundaries, of clear-cut distinctions between worlds, genders, and even literary genres. With memory functioning as the basis for the renegotiation of identity, the novel heralds a new approach to reality based on the acceptance of difference, contamination, and hybridity as the only way to salvation.

### *A flooded dystopia*

Logan's novel fits in a long tradition of British flood apocalypses<sup>3</sup> with which it shares the urge to discuss, by way of dystopian transfiguration, crucial issues of contemporary life. The setting of the novel is a postlapsarian world where earth is reduced to a few islands and human beings are divided into two separate and conflicting groups, the landlockers and the dampings. The former, who represent only 10% of the whole population, live on the islands, where they have established a highly stratified kind of society in which status depends on how far from the sea one lives, inner 'old' land being much more precious than 'reclaimed' land. As for the dampings, they lead an extremely hard and competitive life on boats, and when they set foot on an island, they are obliged to wear a small bell, for the landlockers fear them and want their presence to be easily spotted. A whole number of different boats sail the sea: there are food-trading clippers, medic galleons, messenger cutters, military tankers, prison boats, but also circus boats that visit the archipelagos and entertain islanders with their shows, getting paid with "gold and coal and quartz and copper" (Logan 3) which they can exchange for food and other necessities. Similar to circus boats, but definitely richer, are the so-called Revival ships, huge cruise liners whose mission is to indoctrinate new converts by performing flamboyant shows based on mind-manipulating techniques.

The protagonists of the novel are two young women, North and Callanish,<sup>4</sup> respectively a damping and a landlocker, who from the very beginning reveal their uneasiness about the reality they belong to. They both hide secrets and variously try to come to terms with a past that inevitably haunts their present. North is an orphan damping who performs in the Excalibur circus with a huge bear, the only true companion in her otherwise lonely life. Her parents, who had worked in the same circus, were killed by their bear when North was only a child. The reader soon discovers that she

is pregnant, although she must hide her condition for fear of losing her job. On board of the small fleet of coracles led by the flagship Excalibur, North shares space and food with a colourful crew: the ringmaster, Jarrow Stirling, and his pregnant wife Avalon; Jarrow's son by a former marriage and horse tamer Ainsel; the acrobats Melia and Whitby; the clowns Dough, Dosh and Cash; the glammers Teal, Cyan and Mauve; and Bero the firebreather. In this variegated group, ambition, rivalry, personal idiosyncrasies mix up with hopes for the future: Jarrow, for instance, expects Ainsel to marry North and go and live with her in a house he is going to buy for them on the island the Stirlings, former landlockers, come from; Ainsel, for his part, is in love with Avalon, whom he has got pregnant, and wishes to lead her to that very same house; as for Avalon, she scorns Ainsel and is resolved on settling on dry land with Jarrow and the new baby. Besides interpersonal conflicts, life on the Excalibur is also jeopardized by 'external threats' connected with the very *raison d'être* of the circus, that is its performing activities. As a matter of fact, each night the ringmaster has to decide which performance to put on, negotiating between the opposite needs of meeting the audience's demand for transgression and avoiding the authorities' censorship.

The other protagonist, Callanish, has left her mother's house on an island of North-West 22 archipelago to live on one of the graceyards lined up along the equator, where she serves as a gracekeeper, seeing to the disposal of dead damplings in the ocean. Her service consists in wrapping the corpses in nets and dropping them into the water; then, she chooses a bird, a grace, for each of them, and lets it starve in a cage on the spot of interment, its death marking the end of mourning for the bereaved. Callanish always wears silk gloves and slippers to cover her webbed hands and feet: she was born out of the mysterious encounter between her mother Veryan and a fantastic sea creature, but her amphibious nature has to be kept jealously hidden in a dichotomous world where 'otherness' falls easy prey to suspicion and rejection. The reader will later discover that Callanish's decision to leave the comfort of firm ground for an inhospitable graceyard is rooted in a traumatic past experience that caused her mother's falling into madness and that often emerges back in her thoughts and dreams.

The two protagonists first meet after a violent storm, when the circus crew visit Callanish's graceyard to dispose of the body of one of the acrobats, Whitby, perished during the tempest. Callanish immediately

understands that North is pregnant and unexpectedly becomes the recipient of the bear girl's secret: like the gracekeeper herself, North's baby is the fruit of an encounter with a marine creature on the seashore, which implies that, in this apparently dichotomous world, the border between different dimensions can be (and in fact is) easily and frequently trespassed. Callanish, for her part, fearlessly shows North her webbed hands. Thus, the two young women recognize each other's alterity and, instead of rejecting it, treasure it as a mark of closeness. But before reaching the end of the novel, when they meet again and decide to live together on the graceyard (which accounts for the plural of the title), Callanish and North must go through further experience in order to be able to sever the painful bond with the past and build a new future. For the gracekeeper, this entails visiting her mother and coming to terms with her sense of guilt, after understanding that Veryan's insane world of superstition and closure can no longer be her own; as for North, happiness is finally achieved by dismissing the circus and its crew, even her adored bear, who dies in a fire deliberately set to the coracles by jealous Avalon. Jarrow eventually resolves to present North and Callanish with the captain ship, the Excalibur, for their life together, while he will retire to the house on firm land with his wife, Ainsel, and the rest of the crew. The ending strikes a utopian note featuring the two protagonists living together on the graceyard with North's newly born webbed child, Ursa: in their new life, conflict leaves room for understanding, for the acceptance of difference, an achievement which owes much to the experience of the 'liminal' that is of utmost importance in the story.

### *Dichotomous vs. liminal space*

As Sandor Klapcsik effectively argues, liminality is central to the contemporary debate on culture and ideology and, as far as literature is concerned, it definitely represents a major issue in such genres as the fantastic or science fiction (Ruthner; Kerman), characterized by what Brian McHale has called the "ontological dominant" (10-11; 59-83). Born in the context of anthropological studies (van Gennep; Turner), the concept of liminality has been variously appropriated by poststructuralist thought, from deconstruction to postcolonial theory, as an effective spatial metaphor to account not only for a contemporary reality that has become more and more unstable, hybrid, blurred, but also for literary texts that reflect instability

and hybridity by muddling generic boundaries, voices, and points of view. Moreover, since it is intended as an “‘undecidable oscillation’ between binary oppositions [...] [...] question[ing] stable identities, hierarchies, and antithesis which have been dominant in human reasoning for centuries or millennia” (Klapcsik 3), liminality “is necessarily outside the ordinary classificatory systems” (Gilead 183) and, as Sarah Gilead argues, it may

carry a transformative power [...] The liminal state invokes a symbolic realm of values, meanings, and forces, a realm which appears to be the antithesis but which is actually the symbiotic counterpart of social structure. [...] the liminal condition symbolically generates those essential human bonds that transcend the social relations derived from the demands of structured daily existence. Liminality thereby expresses universal moral values or, in terms of those values, a critique of structure-bound behaviors or norms. (Gilead 183)

Thus, liminality decisively contributes to enhancing the ethical import of the literary text, bringing to the foreground questions of identity, political and social structuring, interpersonal relationships.

Interestingly, Klapcsik specifies that liminality may affect the literary text at different levels: thematic, narrative, generic, and cultural (Klapcsik 20-21). In *The Gracekeepers*, the first three kinds can be easily identified. In particular, thematic liminality, defined by Klapcsik as the tendency to “[b]ur the boundaries of the self and the Other, organic and artificial, human and mechanical, and most of all, between the real world and the fantastic-virtual” (Klapcsik 21), is strongly emphasised in the novel, which may in fact sound strange in a story that is apparently built according to a stiffly binary structure. As a matter of fact, not only is its temporal dimension evidently split between past and present, the world as it used to be and the flooded reality of the here and now, but also space responds to a rigid juxtaposition of land and sea which, in semiotic terms, may at first sight be considered “two [...] subspaces” that tend to be “mutually non-intersecting” (Lotman, *Structure* 229). Moreover, the very first paragraph of the novel—“In a world that is almost entirely sea, placing your feet on land was a privilege that must be earned” (1)—immediately establishes a strict hierarchy between the two poles, which consequently catalyses a whole range of different paradigms with patent ideological and cultural implications: landlockers vs. damplings, comfort vs. poverty, power vs. subjection, rules vs. transgression, stability vs. instability, safety vs.

danger. To put it differently, “the spatial order of the world [...] becomes an organizing element around which its non-spatial features are also constructed” (Lotman, *Structure* 220).

Nevertheless, this postlapsarian reality is not as simple as it might at first appear. Dry land, for instance, is internally organised according to a ranked structure, with soil becoming more valuable as one gradually recedes from water, progressing from the seashore through reclaimed land and farmland. What Lotman calls the “appeal of the centre” (Lotman *Universe* 140) is here confirmed by the fact that the inner cores of the islands, covered by old trees, are chosen by landlockers as the site of their religious ceremonies. Consonantly, the horizontal progression from margin to centre is paralleled by a gradual vertical lowering of the buildings, so that the further one penetrates inland, the lower the houses get, signalling the landlockers’ need for steadiness and roots:

follow[ing] the gangway up from the port, [...] [t]he tin-sided towers looked more ramshackle than ever, the waves slapping at their bases. [...] on [...] the reclaimed land, [...] the houses became lower and larger. These houses were not impossible to buy – reclaimed land was cheaper, not worshipped like the real earth. [...] Past the houses, closer still to the island’s centre, lay farmland. (15-16)

The metaphorical implications of this reversed verticality need hardly be explained. Instead of tending upwards, which, in semiotic terms, might allude to some kind of positivity, height being traditionally associated with the possibility of transcending human finiteness and transience, this fallen world is dominated by a centripetal force that condemns humanity to the ground. Even the trees, whose very shape should hint at an upward tension suitable to the sacredness they are invested with, provide no means for a true elevation, being as they are lumped together in dark copses:

At the edge of the trees [...] [t]he ground was clear, but above that *the trees twisted together, interlocking black shapes too dense for them to see far*. Scraps of coloured fabric were tied around some of the branches. There were little piles of things at the base of several trees: shiny objects, scraps of paper, soft-looking moss. A shrine? An offering? (18, my emphases)

In symbolic terms, the impossibility to see the sky through the trees evidently suggests that no true transcendental meaning may be attributed to the superstitious religiosity of the landlockers. Besides, the sky itself



lacks all verticality in the novel, and is either implicitly assimilated to the sea—"The sky was flat and blue as an upturned bowl" (109); "the sky was *barnacled* with clouds" (123, my emphasis)—or overtly described as indistinguishable from it: "The sky and the sea were as flat and blue as china plates, so perfect that she couldn't see where they met" (74). In this way, Logan intentionally undermines the traditional hierarchy between heaven and earth, with decisive ideological consequences: if the sky is but a reflection of the sea, then whatever humans imagine to belong up there (gods and saints, glory or punishment) is to be interpreted as a mere projection of their all too earthly hopes and fears. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, in the novel, religion invariably equals false belief, be it the glossy religiosity of the Revivalists<sup>5</sup> or the primitive superstition of the landlockers, who perform their ceremonies by moving in circles like the damned in Dante's *Inferno* ("Everyone must march in circles, around the island and spiralling in to link hands and surround the copse at the centre" [183]). The dampings predictably phantasise about these ceremonies, envisaging them as violent rites during which the landlockers pour out their resentment on whomever does not fit their 'normality'; hence, the widespread news of babies "born with gills and webbed hands, [...] half-fish monster[s]" (60) buried alive in the woods. Throughout the novel, however, the reader remains uncertain as to whether these rumours are to be interpreted as true or not, since the manifold prejudices that permeate both sides actually prevent the reality of things to be unveiled.

The illusion of rigid binarity is further unmasked by the presence of several 'liminal' spaces which, apparently functioning as 'frontiers' in the Lotmanian sense of the term, that is as boundaries whose function is "to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal" and to separate "'one's own' from 'someone else's'" (Lotman, *Universe* 140), are in fact characterised by porousness, each of them representing "an 'in-between' — a 'space between' [...] [a] middle place, composed of interactions and interviews [...] exchanges and encounters" (de Certeau 127). The circus, the graveyard, the boat, the seashore are all envisaged as 'territories' in which different dimensions meet and mingle, so that they play a key part in the protagonists' *Bildung* towards the acquisition of a totally new insight into reality and its infinite possibilities. In the same sense, even the human body turns out to represent a liminal territory, acquiring specific importance insofar as it mediates between the individual and the outside world.

Both North and Callanish belong to liminal places: North lives on a circus boat, Callanish on a graceyard, and the importance of these two sites in the story is also illustrated at the structural level, since they are the setting of, respectively, its opening and closing chapters, entitled “Before” and “After.” “Before” introduces the world of the circus through Callanish’s childhood memory of a night show, during which she witnessed the death of a couple of performers killed by a bear. The reader will later discover that the victims were North’s parents. This section functions as a sort of prologue by introducing all the main characters and themes of the novel, while the last section, “After,” set in the graceyard, marks its positive hopeful epilogue.

The circus is the territory of imagination, of “colours, lights, the death-mocking glory of twists and catches and bright gleams of skin” (3). Its ‘magical’ atmosphere is created anew each time the Excalibur reaches a different island: when the convoy approaches a new dock, the crew helps pulling the ropes to turn “the boat’s sails” into “the striped ceiling of the big top” and “the wide, flat deck” into “the stage” (1), hence a complete metamorphosis is accomplished. The circus may be considered as a sort of Foucauldian “heterotopia of deviation” (Foucault 25), whose role is “to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (Foucault 27). In *The Gracekeepers*, Logan exposes this illusion by deliberately blurring boundaries, especially as far as gender is concerned; for instance, she tackles questions of identity and knowledge by focusing on the human body, as the following descriptions of the circus folk patently show:

Out on stage, the rest of the circus folk were performing the maypole, everything wrapped in ribbons: the pole, their hair, their bodies, all wrapped tight so the crowd couldn’t tell which were girls and which were boys, so they were all girlboysgirls. (1)

All circus folk kept their hair long, dyed bright with whatever coloured things they could scavenge. It helped with the illusion of their performance; their tightrope-walk between the genders. (12)

Callanish [...] realised that the tattooed women were the tallest she’d ever seen — and then, with a shock, she realised that they weren’t women at all. She looked more closely at the pink-haired men, and felt suddenly foolish for not seeing that

they were women. Or was it the other way round? She dared another glance, but still couldn't be sure. (77)

Doubt is here articulated at a double level: on the one hand, the passages foreground the epistemological uncertainty of the subject in front of reality ("The crowd *couldn't tell*;" "She dared another glance, but still *couldn't be sure*"); on the other, stress is also put on the age-old opposition between essence and appearance, an ontological doubt concerning identity ("their tightrope-walk between the genders") which the circus folk perfectly embody qua performers.

The liminality of the graceyard is of a different kind. Throughout the novel, it is described as an inbetween place: "Graceyards were not a destination. Lined up along the equator as they were, deep in the doldrums, they were places for passing through" (25). The graceyard is suspended between different dimensions: not only does it evidently mediate between life and death, but it also represents an attempt to join land and water in its being a stable place in the heart of the sea, which damplings significantly arrive at before being buried for good in the ocean. Moreover, its long dock protruding from the house visually mimics the attempt to bridge a gap, to reach further, which accounts for the crucial role the place is granted at the end of the story. Despite its association with death, or maybe just because of the archetypal implications of this association, death by/in water being notoriously a symbol of rebirth, the graceyard becomes for the two protagonists a space of new possibilities, which in their case evidently takes on a specifically gendered connotation. Thus, if at the beginning of the story Callanish perceives the place as a hindrance to realization, as she overtly expresses to fellow gracekeeper Odell during one of his sporadic visits ("That's the choice. [...] Here or there. Dampling or landlocker. Sea or land. Man or woman. But this is something different. Don't you see? [...] We can stay here in the graceyards and be nothing. I mean, be neither," [32]), the graceyard eventually turns into the perfect setting for a different life, for a possible 'third way:' instead of "nothing" or "neither," one can be 'something else,' provided one is ready to accept the kaleidoscopic, 'circus-like,' quality of reality.

This is the reason why the experience of the circus cannot, and must not, be totally dismissed, although for North, the final transformation actually implies leaving the circus behind, with the death of her loved bear

to symbolically mark the decisive step of her liberation from her old life. However, by having Callanish and North reach their graceyard on board of the Excalibur, that is a *boat* that can transform into a *circus*, Logan further highlights the metaphorical import of both spaces. On the one hand, the boat performs its traditional function of connecting places (“[A boat] can take you from one end of the world to the other” [36]), resulting in “a compromise” (163) between land and sea. And a compromise the Excalibur actually is, since it hosts characters with different origins: landlockers like Red Gold and Ainsel, as well as damplings like Avalon and North. Therefore, also the boat is conceived in Foucaultian terms as a sort of “no man’s land,” in the same way the graceyard is; consequently, both the circus folk and the gracekeepers appear as “outcasts:” “gracekeepers weren’t like [...] landlockers. They were outcasts, just like circus folk” (92). On the other hand, in its being a boat that turns into a circus, the Excalibur is also intended to stress the idea of metamorphosis. Change is what characters either fear or long for, depending on their condition: landlockers, for instance, are afraid of change, while most of the damplings would like their life to take a different turn, they would gladly swap roles with the clams. The problem is that both groups persist in a binary “either or” logic, while the story—in particular its liminal spatiality—points to a ‘polysyndetic’ approach to reality, whose metamorphic quality needs the acceptance of difference. This is corroborated by the experience of the fantastic, whose background is unsurprisingly represented by yet another liminal site.

### *Fantastic liminality*

The fantastic enters the world of *The Gracekeepers* in the guise of a mysterious encounter taking place on the seashore. This latter, in particular the so-called “blackshore,” that is “the line of seaweed brought up by the high tide” (36-37), qualifies as the liminal space *par excellence*, because of its hybrid nature, it being a strip of sandy land the sea continuously invades with water. Unlike other typical ‘portals’ of fantasy literature—for example the rabbit hole in *Alice* or the wardrobe in C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia Chronicles*—which give access to a fantastic world separated from our own and different from it in its essential laws and features, the permeable space of the seashore signals that the metaleptic breach of ontological

boundaries is here to be intended as an interpenetration of reality and fantasy that tends to obliterate difference instead of highlighting it, and which finds proper reification in the interlacing of two bodies, a human being and a marine creature. Logan draws on Celtic folklore and on legends of selkies, marine creatures significantly suspended between worlds and genders,<sup>6</sup> to poetically describe the experience of the fantastic in terms of love-making, as both North's and Veryan's recollections clearly witness:

She [North] had lain along the blackshore, seaweed tangling in her hair [...] *Then: a slow pull out of sleep, reality seeping into her dreams. A mouth pressing against hers, cold as the ocean. The weight of a body on her own.* The limbs, the angles, the planes of the body matched her own—but not a man, not a woman. *In the dim light of the stars, she saw the silvery gleam of scales.* The sea-swimmer had finally come to her. *Yes, she'd said, yes.* She'd tilted back her head and opened up her body, letting words repeat inside her head, names she'd heard only in stories: selkie, nereid, mermaid [...].

"So I woke at dawn," she said, "and I went back to my coracle. I thought I must have imagined it. I thought I'd wanted it so much that I'd dreamed it happening. Until—' she motioned to her bump. 'And I know you won't believe me, but I had to tell someone. So there it is. I've told you."

"I believe you," said Callanish. (95, my emphases)

She [Veryan] fell into sleep. *Then: a slow pull out, reality seeping into her dreams. A mouth pressing against hers, cold as the sea.* Was this her husband, come back to love her again? She felt *the weight of a body on her own.* She raised her hips. *In the dim light of the stars, she saw the silvery gleam of scales.* (189, my emphases)

Syntactic and lexical repetition contributes here to conveying the idea that such encounters are recurrent in human experience and that, although the world of the novel, dominated by abuse of power and discrimination, violently marginalizes it, the fantastic stubbornly strikes back to affirm that a different reality may—and does in fact—exist. Moreover, the ontological stratification here suggested through the reference to sleep, dream, imagination, interestingly creates a sort of kaleidoscopic blurring of boundaries resulting into a questioning of the idea of reality itself. By describing the irruption of the fantastic into the dimension of the real in terms of "reality seeping into [...] dreams", a complete reversal of established hierarchies is performed: fantasy becomes 'reality,' and as such

it intrudes the life of the characters to change it forever.

At the same time, the fantastic results in the creation of a liminal body which becomes the very epitome of the possible conciliation between fantasy and reality, sea and land, marine and human, dampling and landlocker. In fact, in the novel bodies are repeatedly used as metaphors of human complexity, being given great attention insofar as they mediate between the individual and the outside world. It is through their bodies that characters get to know what surrounds them, be it reality, fantasy, or other individuals, and the bearing of this knowledge on their souls finds a sort of objective correlative in the scars engraved in their flesh. This is particularly true in the case of the circus folk, for instance the acrobats, whose limbs appear criss-crossed by “old injuries” (8), or for Bero, the firebreather, “a short, broad man with long-healed burns covering his right arm” and “his left arm [...] missing” (79). Red Gold, for his part, tries to cover the scars on his face with glitter, which symbolically recalls the illusionary power of the circus, where tattoos and ribbons, dyed hair and ruffled shirts, are used to offer an alternative to harsh reality.

In Callanish’s case, her webbed body turns into the very ‘door’ through which the Other may enter one’s world and reciprocal recognition occur, as her first meeting with North testifies:

North heard the shush of silk, and Callanish’s ungloved hand was in hers. Her skin was cool and smooth. Their hands were linked, but their palms did not align – North could feel a high ridge of skin linking Callanish’s knuckles, soft and solid. Webbing, like a fish. Like a mermaid [...] North knew now why the gracekeeper had believed where her baby had come from – why the gracekeeper was the only person she’d ever met who would truly understand [...] She pressed their hands tighter, holding them close [...] It was then, with their hands linked, that North first felt her baby. (97)

It is worth noting here that mutual understanding is not hindered by difference (“their palms did not align”); on the contrary, it is this very difference that allows recognition and empathy. No wonder, then, that throughout the story, North insistently thinks of and longs for Callanish’s body, significantly identifying it as a new, perfect world to discover and share: “the soft web of the gracekeeper’s fingers, the sun-clean scent of her skin, the flutter of North’s baby inside her. That was *a new world; a kind of perfect*” (122, my emphases).

### *The past, trauma, and memory*

The experience of the fantastic does not take place in the here and now of the story, but is significantly evoked through memory, enriching the symbolic texture of the novel with a further *limes*, the one between past and present. The contours of the former, however, always remain hazy and confused, both at the collective and the personal level, and when memories surface, they always challenge the present, casting their traumatic shadows on it.

Of the world before the apocalypse very little is said or remembered, except for some scanty memories evoking the abundance of land in the past: “In the days of the great-great-greats, the land stretched out so far you could have walked it for weeks without a sniff of sea. That was the time of true processions: long gleeful snakes of people stretched across valleys and hills. Then the land shrank, and shrank, and shrank” (183). The features of the old world only survive in such rare ancient maps as the one Callanish, a cartographer’s great-great-great-great-granddaughter, keeps pinned to her wall: “The land that her ancestor had mapped no longer existed. The contours of mountains and valleys, the lines denoting when one country became another, the shaded colours to show kingship: all of it was gone under the endless ocean. Back then it had shown the real world. Now it was only history, stories of a place that once was” (119).

Individual memories definitely prevail in the story, especially in connection with the two protagonists. Epitomical from this point of view is the troublesome link with the past that marks Callanish’s life, namely her relationship with her mother Veryan, which is progressively unveiled to the reader thanks to the surfacing of scattered memories. Callanish feels guilty for abandoning Veryan in the sacred wood where she had decided to give birth to her second child, and for her consequent fall into a state of dreamlike insanity. It is in order to atone for this sin that she becomes a gracekeeper at the equator. Nevertheless, the sense of guilt continues to haunt her thoughts and dreams, for instance during the storm:

One morning, she opened the door to her mother. Veryan looked awkward, apologetic, and very pregnant. The sun was low, shining through the doorway and into Callanish’s eyes, so that every time she tried to focus on her mother, she could not. Veryan wavered and pulsed, like the distant sea on a hot day. Standing there on

the porch in the middle of the graceyard, she asked for help. Callanish was going to help her mother. She would get it right this time. She would be brave and wise and her hands would be steady no matter what. But she did not know how. She could not afford to make a mistake again. She closed the door, to buy some time to think, and when she opened it again her mother was gone. (73-74)

The traumatic nature of memory is however best exemplified in Veryan's own recollections, recorded in the only chapter that bears her name, the fifteenth, whose distinguishing feature is unsurprisingly its hallucinatory quality. In it, the continuous overlapping of time levels—the present routine of tea-making confusedly interweaving with memories of past ceremonies performed in the sacred wood—is first of all intended to reproduce the distorted dynamics of a distracted mind traumatically caught up in a short-circuit between past and present:

Veryan remembered everything. Spring was the bestest and most important time to the gods, and as the most loved child on the island—she had never been told this officially but she knew it, and never hesitated to inform her older sister, as long as their mother couldn't hear—she was due to lead the procession. She had not led it last year, but that was because she was only nine. Now she was nineteen, and the procession was for her marriage. But no, a year later from nine made her ten, so she wouldn't be married for a while yet. She remembered now. She remembered everything.

Veryan filled the kettle and lifted it on to the cooker. Her hands shook. She looked down at them and they seemed strange to her: the skin softer, the joints stiffer, the hands of an old woman. But they could not be hers, because she was nineteen. No, she was nine. She was ten. (181)

Veryan's memories epitomize the repetitive mechanisms of what Dominick LaCapra calls the "acting out" of trauma, characterized by a repetition compulsion in which all distinctions are cancelled and the individual is continuously thrown back in time: "victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences in flashbacks or in nightmares or in words that are compulsively repeated" (LaCapra 143).

On the contrary, the "working through" process entails an elaboration of intrusive mnemonic contents, leading the subject to discriminate between different temporal layers: "To the extent one works through trauma, [...] one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then



while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (LaCapra 22). This process, which does not simply consist in erasing a haunting memory but “means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details” (LaCapra 144), is what Callanish undergoes by choosing to visit her mother on the North-West 22 archipelago, thus facing the ghosts from her past. As soon as she arrives on Veryan’s island after the long voyage from the graceyard, memories start crowding in: “Memories of her childhood home loomed up, faded as old paper: soaking in a herb-scented bath, her mouth watering for pepper-pumpkin soup, the song of the wind in the trees” (246). Callanish finds Veryan in the thick of the wood and, differently from what she had done years before, she now helps her mother and leads her back home:

Callanish fed her mother, bathed her mother, put her mother to bed. She tweezed splinters from her mother’s feet and stroked her mother’s hair until she fell asleep. [...] Every night she sat and watched over her mother, every morning she made breakfast for her mother, every afternoon she weeded and planted the back garden with her mother, every evening she fell asleep upright in her wooden chair and had to run into the woods to the World Tree and bring back her mother. Did she know? Did she know that the tree was where she’d lost a child? Did she know that this soil held the tiny bones?

At times it seemed that Veryan remembered. She’d call out her daughter’s name in her sleep, but when Callanish woke her, she smiled glassily and patted her hand. It took Callanish longer than it should have to realise that her mother dreamed not of her, but of the daughter she was yet to have. She wished that she could be that daughter, blessed and happy and at home. (261-263)

Callanish is in search of forgiveness, and although Veryan’s condition prevents full recognition, her visit is a necessary step to take in order to reconcile herself to her past, leave it behind, and face a different future: “Callanish had sailed across the world to her mother’s house knowing that she would receive one of two answers: yes, she was forgiven; or no, she was not forgiven. Now she had her answer, and it was neither. She was not forgiven, but she was not unforgiven” (266).

Also North’s past hides a terrible trauma, the violent death of her parents during one of their performances, when the huge bear her mother used to dance with in the circus killed both of them. North is then left to share her sense of loss with the offspring of the killing beast, a bear cub who grows up with her and eventually becomes her fellow performer.

Thus, North's life re-enacts that of her parents, perpetuating the past in a present where the bear turns into a sort of surrogate family: "Alone in their coracle, they were not performers, not burdens, not dangers, not weapons, not food. They were family" (44). On closer scrutiny, the bear may well feature as a symbol of the traumatic past: his "faulty" (6) memory makes him difficult to tame, and the golden chains which North uses during their show and which the animal could easily snap if only "he decided to use his strength" (9), might symbolise the vain attempt to fetter the past, to bridle it in order to prevent it from painfully haunting the present. It comes as no surprise, then, that North's prospect of a new life may come true only after her bear's death, which noticeably coincides with the destruction of the circus coracles by fire, on the one hand, and with the birth of her webbed baby daughter, on the other.

As already pointed out, at the end of the novel Callanish and North sail to their graceyard on board of the *Excalibur*. Within the liminal space of the boat they eventually succeed in telling each other about their past, about Veryan and the bear, so that by narrativizing it, they can reconcile with their trauma and get ready for the future:

Every night, Callanish dreamed—not of the sea's endless call, but of her mother. At first she welcomed the dreams, revelling in them, wishing to crawl inside them for ever and never wake. She told North stories of her childhood: the candlelit processions to the World Tree, her mother baking poppyseed bread and slathering it with honey, the pair of them snapping icicles off the window ledges to dip in flower dyes and draw in the snow. The days passed, and her dreams slipped away. She grew glad to wake to North's smile and her baby's hands splaying like starfish. Every night, North expected to dream of her bear—to wake gasping and frantic, ready to leap into the water so she could be with him again. But she did not. Her sleep was calm and dreamless, rocked by the rhythm of the sea. She told Callanish about her bear: the way his breath turned to snuffles when he was happy, his delight in crisped fish skin, the rough brown pads under his front paws. Together, the new crew of the *Excalibur* rested. [...] Slowly, slowly, they moved forwards. (289-290)

The new world envisaged in the last chapter of *The Gracekeepers*, entitled "After," is in fact no Edenic elsewhere. On the contrary, it materializes in the graceyard where Callanish and North decide to live with *their* daughter, Ursa. The choice of the Latin name can be no coincidence here: it refers not only to a female bear (thus providing further evidence

for the fact that North has actually overcome her trauma and can now pay tribute to the memory of her animal), but also to the two constellations of the northern hemisphere, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, with Polaris, the North Star, to mark the end of the Little Dipper's handle. This astronomical detail implicitly suggests that the two protagonists have finally found their way. The poetic picture Logan draws in the last paragraph of the story says much about the kind of utopia she has in mind:

North and Callanish slid off the dock and into the water, tilting back their heads to let the sun warm their faces. Around them the sea stretched to the horizon, silver bright, busy with worlds. Between them Ursa swam, stretching out her webbed fingers, floating between earth and sky. (293)

The explicit of the novel strikes a note of harmony, with Ursa "floating [in water] between earth and sky." Like Callanish's body, also Ursa's bears testimony to the encounter between different worlds, between the earth and the sea, but her name adds a further dimension, since it points to the stars. By choosing the sky as the very last image, indeed the very last word of the novel, Logan finally aims at recovering the upward verticality her fictional world is throughout denied, although there can be no doubt that her idea of heaven is and will always be a very earthly one.

### *Generic and narrative liminality*

The so far illustrated ontological stratification at the core of *The Gracekeepers* poses a challenge to both readers and critics, not only for the definition of the reality they are presented with, but also when it comes to deciding which narrative genre the story belongs to. As it is often the case with fantastic fiction in general (Todorov 41-44; Jackson 3-4, 26-37; Cornwell 34-41, 140-144; Clute 226-227; Fenkl iii-viii), and contemporary narratives in particular (Mendlesohn 160-171; Baccolini, *Gender and Genre; Finding Utopia*), different generic elements are merged in the story. It is what Klapcsik defines as generic liminality, which occurs when narrative works are "on the edges of various (sub-) genres" (Klapcsik 20). If we accept Tom Moylan's definition of the dystopian text as one opening "in the midst of a social 'elsewhere' that appears to be far worse than any in the 'real world'" (Moylan xiii), then Logan's novel is to be considered a

dystopia, since its setting is a post-apocalyptic world where such ordinary objects as fresh fruit, coloured paper, or textiles have become inestimable goods, while money has lost all value. Instead of a hyper-scientific future, Logan envisages here what Jean Pfaelzer calls “a historical collapse, a regression” (Pfaelzer 80) to a pre-technological society populated by individuals who struggle for life and suffer from loneliness.

Nonetheless, the contours of this world remain, recognizably albeit distortedly, those of our own, and although fantasy repeatedly penetrates them, no total immersion in magic occurs. Rather, the fantastic somehow lurks behind the scenes, never to be overtly acknowledged nor spoken; it is there, but its presence has to be hidden, and, when revealed, it is utterly stigmatized for both superstition and fear. In this sense, the novel might be referred to the category of the so-called “intrusion fantasy,” that is a narrative where, according to Farah Mendlesohn’s definition, “the fantastic is the bringer of chaos. [...] It is horror and amazement. It takes us out of safety without taking us from our place” (Mendlesohn 16). This is in fact the way the fantastic is regarded by the majority of the characters, especially the landlockers, who feel threatened by all deviation from the ‘norm,’ for instance by babies who, like Callanish, are born with webbed fingers and gills. However, most of the chapters in the novel (16 out of 27) are narrated from Callanish’s (10 chapters) and North’s (6 chapters) points of view, and one cannot help noticing that *their* approach to the fantastic is totally—one might add, inevitably—different, because they perceive it as part of their everyday experience. For this reason, magical realism may also be evoked, although *The Gracekeepers* seems to propose an original reinterpretation of this literary mode: as a matter of fact, the balance between reality and fantasy which is typical of magical realist fiction<sup>7</sup> is here never given for granted, but rather envisaged as a goal to be pursued through a continuous attempt to negotiate between different positions, different dimensions and realities. To put it differently, in *The Gracekeepers*, the fantastic continuously “hovers in the corner of our eye” (Mendlesohn 12), like in the so-called “liminal fantasy,” it knocks on the reader’s door, so to say, to be let in. And once that door is opened, a wholly new world becomes possible, as the happy ending of the story, depicting the two protagonists living blissfully together on the graceyard with Ursa, seems to suggest.

The insertion of a utopian ending within an otherwise dystopian context assimilates Logan’s novel to a tradition of female narratives—from

Le Guin to Butler and Atwood, to name but a few—which, according to Raffaella Baccolini, reject closure, thus “allowing readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work” (Baccolini, *Finding Utopia* 520). As Baccolini further argues discussing contemporary dystopian science fiction:

Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions, singularity, and neutral and objective knowledge and acknowledging the importance of difference, multiplicity, complexity, situated knowledges, and hybridity, recent dystopian fiction by women resists genre purity in favor of a hybrid text that renovates dystopian science fiction by making it politically and formally oppositional. [...] The notion of an impure genre, one with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology. (Baccolini *Finding Utopia* 166)

*The Gracekeepers* heralds this “resistance to a hegemonic ideology,” and it does so also through its narrative structure, which may be defined as polyphonic. Logan’s choice of a heterodiegetic voice whose focalization shifts from one character to the other—each chapter bearing the name of its focalizer as a title—helps further undermine superficial binarity by unmasking ideology as a biased construct and showing the multifaceted nature of reality, for which simple polarization can never satisfactorily account. This perfectly suits Klapcsik’s definition of narrative liminality, which occurs “when the reader oscillates among various perspectives, focal points, styles, and intertextual registers” (Klapcsik 21). The multifocal insight into both events and the characters’ inner thoughts and feelings, thanks to the frequent use of free indirect discourse, compels the reader to realize that all evaluations are far from fixed and that they actually depend on the point of view from which reality is perceived.

### *Conclusion*

Kirsty Logan’s complex, truly fascinating novel, poses a lot of decisive questions about our world and our society by means of a displacement into a dystopian universe which, thanks to the encounter with, and acceptance of, the fantastic, eventually opens up to hope. In this process, the experience of liminality plays a pivotal role since it is through the acceptance of the

complexity and fluidity of reality that the characters gain deeper insight into the world and their own lives. On close scrutiny, Logan's story perfectly succeeds in realizing what Deborah O'Keefe holds as the primary function of fantasy: "[...] fantasy can expand the mind and the heart, suggesting unusual choices and perspectives. Fantasy does not provide comfortable answers and solve problems. It poses questions, nudging readers toward a new openness. It is moral but not moralizing" (O'Keefe 9-10).

"Moral but not moralizing" is a perfect definition of Logan's literary operation, which addresses vital contemporary issues with the intention to denounce the violence of prejudice and to endorse change. After all, as Ursula Le Guin effectively argues:

Fantasists, whether they use the ancient archetypes of myth and legend or the younger ones of science and technology, may be talking as seriously as any sociologist—and a good deal more directly—about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived. For after all, as great scientists have said and as all children know, it is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception, and compassion, and hope. (Le Guin 53)



- 1 Reviewers have variously hailed *The Gracekeepers* as “[a] powerful tale [...] beguiling, absorbing [...] a delicious piece of work from a supremely talented writer” (Davies); “rich and inventive” (Campbell); “spellbinding” (Heller); “electrifying [...] after all, beautiful” (Ditum); “[a] highly original fantasy, set in a haunting sea-world both familiar and mysterious” (qtd Logan back cover). The novel won the Lambda Prize for LGBT Science Fiction, Fantasy or Horror in 2016.
- 2 Logan’s first collection of tales, *The Rental Heart and Other Fairytales* (2014), contains a story entitled “The Gracekeeper,” which can be considered the nucleus from which the 2015 novel developed, although its protagonist is far from Callanish’s complexity in *The Gracekeepers*.
- 3 See S. Fowler Wright, *Deluge* (1928), J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962), Richard Cowper’s series *White Bird of Kinship* (1978-1982), and, more recently, Maggie Gee, *The Flood* (2004) and Sam Taylor, *The Island at the End of the World* (2009), to name but a few.
- 4 The names of the two protagonists patently point to northern topography, Callanish being a village on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, home to a famous megalithic site, the so-called Standing Stones. Other characters in the novel bear names variously connected with real topography (Jarrow, Stirling, Whitby, Veryan), Celtic folklore and Arthurian legends (Ainsel, Avalon, Excalibur), and even classical mythology (Melia). This cultural syncretism perfectly suits the novel’s ambition to represent an allegory of human experience.
- 5 The revivalists’ obsession with cleanness on board (new converts are employed to “[scrub] at already spotless walls” [225]), matched with their indifference towards the pollution of the sea (“All the big boats left filth in their wake” [221]), allows Logan to strike a brief note of warning about environmental risks in the contemporary world.
- 6 Selkies or silkies are well known figures of Scottish and Irish folklore, “[w] omen of the seal people [who] were thought to make splendid wives, except that their children had webbed toes and fingers. [...] Women, too, could find seal lovers, by sitting on lonely rocks and weeping into the sea. Such

lovers were kind and gentle, but prone to sudden disappearances” (Monaghan 411-12).

- 7 As Anne Hegerfeldt points out: “Critics have generally commented on the imperturbable attitude magic realist texts adopt towards the incongruity of their elements. Within the text, the non-realistic or fantastic event is not perceived as improbable or impossible [...] Instead of being rejected as something that cannot be, supernatural events are perceived as normal or at least possible by magic realist focalizers” (Hegerfeldt 53-54).





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Tra le sue pubblicazioni si ricordano la monografia *L'officina dello scrivere. Il carteggio di Alexander von Humboldt*, Aracne 2018; i saggi in volume *Poesie und Nicht Poesie. Rudolf Borchardt und Benedetto Croce* (in Burdorf, D.; Benne, C. (Hrsg.), *Rudolf Borchardt und Friedrich Nietzsche. Schreiben und Denken im Zeichen der Philologie*, Berlin, Quintus 2017, pp. 133-153), *Das Fremd-Bild in Georg Forsters Reise um die Welt. Bildsprache und Sprachbilder* (in Greif, S.; Ewert, M. (Hrsg.), *Georg-Forsters-Studien-XIX*, Kassel, Kassel University Press 2014, pp. 191-215).

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## Abstracts

**Lisa Schulz, *Émergence d'une identité judéo-alsacienne. Claude Vigée et ses aïeuls***

Depuis leur installation sur la rive gauche du Rhin, les Juifs d'Alsace ont eu des échanges culturels et religieux interrompus avec ceux d'outre-Rhin tandis qu'ils ont développé moins de contact avec les Juifs de la « vieille France ». Mais la Révolution française entraîne la fermeture des frontières, notamment entre la France et l'Allemagne. C'est ainsi que, comme le souligne, à juste titre, le chercheur Freddy Raphaël « c'est la Révolution qui en fermant les frontières, a délimité l'entité alsacienne et a amené les Juifs d'Alsace à prendre conscience de leur relative spécificité ». Au fur et à mesure qu'ils prennent conscience de cette identité et qu'ils s'enracinent en Alsace, « leur horizon rétrécit ». La frontière est donc liée à l'affirmation d'une identité et paradoxalement c'est elle qui est à l'origine d'un repli sur soi, comme nous le montrerons à travers l'œuvre littéraires de l'écrivain et poète Claude Vigée.

**Marco Canani, *One whose "fate" was writ' in water: Percy Bysshe Shelley and the water sublime, between poetry and cultural memory***

Percy Bysshe Shelley's first biographers suggest that water was a mesmerizing presence in his life. Particularly the mid nineteenth-century life-writings written by Shelley's friends Thomas Medwin (1847), Thomas Jefferson Hogg (1858), and Edward Trelawny (1858) narrate the poet's

‘water sublime’ from end-to-start, almost searching for incidents and poetic hints that might anticipate Shelley’s fate. Indeed, Shelley’s poetry provides several examples of his sublime attraction to water. In “Mont Blanc” (1818), water is depicted in the sinuosity of the flowing streams and in the unfathomable magnificence of the ice blocks, while “The Cloud” (1818-19) suggests Shelley’s knowledge of Adam Walker’s and Luke Howard’s studies. More significantly, water becomes a metaphor for poetic creation in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). By interrelating life-writing and poetry, this article investigates the role of water in Shelley’s life and work in the light of his pantheistic views. By focusing on contemporary sites of memory, the article subsequently discusses the ways in which water has been associated to Shelley’s image in cultural memory, taking into account several media, from lithographs to paintings and monuments. In addition to Shelley’s graves in Rome, *The Rising Universe* – the kinetic memorial installed in Horsham for the poet’s bicentenary in 1996 – suggests water as a primal source of inspiration and experience for the poet. From this perspective, material culture responds to Shelley’s old and new biographies, creating a narrative that, at least in part, re-writes his life from his death.

**Elisabetta Marino, *Mathilda by Mary Shelley: An Intertextual Analysis***

Even before P.B. Shelley’s drowning, Mary Shelley’s first stay in Italy was marred by the death of her two children (Clara Everina died in September 1818, while William passed away in June 1819), and by her subsequent estrangement from her husband, held partially responsible for her inconsolable loss. In the Summer of 1819, while she was sojourning in Villa Valsovano (near Leghorn), Mary Shelley occupied herself with the composition of a novella entitled *Mathilda*, which she completed in a very short time. The only copy of her manuscript (a story dealing with the theme of a father-daughter incest) was immediately sent to Godwin, who was supposed to superintend its publication. Nonetheless, *Mathilda* was not published until well after the writer’s death, in 1959, nor was the manuscript ever returned, despite Mary’s requests.

Up until recent years, the novella has received little critical attention; moreover, most of the scholars engaged in the analysis of the text have chosen a strictly biographical approach, focusing on the complex and troublesome relationship between Mary Shelley and her family members. Conversely, this paper aims at offering an intertextual investigation of the text, connecting it with her debut novel *Frankenstein*, and with *Proserpine*

(a verse drama published immediately after *Mathilda*), thus demonstrating that, far from merely mirroring her life events, *Mathilda* can be regarded as a landmark of Mary Shelley's career as a writer.

**Debnita Chakravarti, *Parsing the Poetics of Letitia Landon's "song of grief and love"***

Letitia Elizabeth Landon was one of the most successful Victorian female writers enjoying an enviable popularity in an age that laid down strict codes for women in general, and women authors in particular. Her poems reveal an abiding engagement with India and Indian women. In the Victorian annuals like *Fisher's Scrapbook* as well as her own long poems like *The Improvisatrice*, she returns to the idea of an 'Indianness' that becomes a recognisable shorthand for certain desirable feminine qualities. In developing her trademark theme of melancholia – a recyclable formula with the ingredients of sorrow, beauty, love and death – India became an important imaginary identity.

My article proposes to explore how Landon employs the idea of India, in an age when Britain was increasingly growing fascinated by its expanding empire, in order to construct a saleable self-image that made her into the recognisable brand name L. E. L. I will examine the interstitial spaces between the two cultures as they reveal themselves in the works of a writer who has long been relegated to the margins by the politics of canonisation and is only just beginning to enjoy the scholarly attention she deserves. And in studying this iconic poet of her time, my paper also questions whether our notions of Victorian British identities and its equations with other cultures need to be reoriented in the light of writings that were till now relegated to the dusty archives.

**Valeria Sperti, *Rendez-vous avec l'histoire: Raphaël Élizé dans le roman de Gaston-Paul Effa***

The article analyses the intertwinement between documentation and creative intuition in Gaston-Paul Effa's novel *Rendez-vous avec l'heure qui blesse* (2015). The work is centred on a character emblematic of colonisation, the veterinary Raphaël Élizé, a descendant of slaves and first black mayor of a rural French community, a victim of Nazism, who becomes a hero of the French republic. The analysis highlights the characteristics of a 'mirror' narration, where the protagonist's biographical events reflect milestones in the History of humanity. The narration brings into play

both black and Jewish memory, slavery, colonialism, and holocaust in the background of power relationships amongst men, which are compared to those between men and animals.

**Hadj Miliani, “Évolution éditoriale et réception décalée en Algérie. Le cas de la production algérienne de langue française récente”**

Cet article tente de tracer à nouveaux frais quelques faits marquants de l'évolution du champ littéraire de langue française en Algérie durant la dernière décennie. En dehors de la bipolarisation relative entre la France et l'Algérie au travers certaines œuvres et quelques écrivains, le secteur paraît assez dynamique quoique dominé par des polémiques et des controverses exacerbées. La présence plus fréquente dans l'espace éditorial d'écrivains 'tardifs', la multiplication des réseaux de publication hors les éditions traditionnelles (auto-édition, publications numériques, etc.) et les phénomènes de médiatisation offrent de ce fait un paysage hétérogène d'où semble néanmoins émerger assez fortement une sorte de « littérature moyenne » qui s'impose autant auprès des critiques que des lecteurs algériens et étrangers. Serait-ce une nouvelle composante morphologique ou seulement les signes d'une situation transitionnelle dont il faudrait attendre la décantation pour voir se profiler un ensemble institutionnel stable et une production littéraire renouvelée ou marquée par un continuum ?

**Isabella Ferron, *Elias Canettis Idee der Sprache und der Literatur. Überlegungen in Die Blendung und Die Stimmen von Marrakesch***

The present paper aims to investigate Canetti's ideas of Language and Literature in his novel *Die Blendung*. It is a comparative analysis with his travelogue *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* that tries to highlight the role Language plays in Canetti's work. In Wien of the early 20th Century the young Canetti was fascinated by Karl Kraus, he experienced the debates about the determination of Language (Mauthner, Wittgenstein). Language has a fundamental role in Canetti's life and work, not only from a biographical point of view: he considers Language as a mysterious force that allows people to know the world. Language is for him not only a medium to communicate, but also a reflection of the world. Language represents a timeless activity that allows the development of subjectivity and individuality.

**Marilena Parlati, ‘Peopling the World’: Negotiating Life and Death in Recent Arabian Nights**

Since their very beginnings as a magmatic concoction of oral tales of very different origins, what Anglophone Western cultures call *The Arabian Nights* are remarkably open-ended, vertiginously intertwined, replicating framed narratives which ‘bifurcate’ and answer readers and listeners back with amazing panache. After the fundamental arrival on European soil of the stories in book form due to the very successful enterprise of François Galland, *The Nights* have undoubtedly been an unrelenting presence in global cultures, so much so that it would be easier to detect writers, artists, cultures who and which do not inscribe them within their textures. While the nineteenth century has seen very innovative and allegedly ‘authentic’ translations, it has also inaugurated a trend towards a series of declared rewritings and reappropriations, often vociferously claimed by widely intended ‘Arabian’, non-European, global authors. Among the very recent re-surfacings of this well of stories that I shall briefly survey, I chose to focus mainly on Salman Rushdie’s *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), a lively repository of histories and stories in which he reads through the Nights and sees post-modernity, global capitalism and terrorism through his usual ironical glittering fairy-tale-like lenses. In his usual irreverent style, Rushdie refashions Scheherazade’s voice and uses the tradition of the *Nights* to merge updated circulatory materials which range from Ibn Rushd to millennial New York and the world of the *jinni*. While a continuous presence in Rushdie’s writing, these *Nights* seem innovative in their ending with a reassuring shift away from programmatic open-endedness, with a collective chorus who brush chaos off page and acknowledge the “extravagant” circulation of stories set in a securely distant past, but also distance them away from the seductive power of a tricky woman narrator or ‘heroine’.

**Roberta Ferrari, “There are more than two options in this world”: The Challenge of Liminality in Kirsty Logan’s *The Gracekeepers***

The paper intends to analyse Kirsty Logan’s much acclaimed debut novel, *The Gracekeepers* (2015), by focusing attention on its spatial dimension, particularly on the key-concept of liminality (Klapcsik 2011). Logan’s imaginary topography draws inspiration on her home landscapes, the fascinating harsh environments of the Scottish islands and seacoast, while the fantastic side of the story owes much to Celtic myths and folklore;

yet, the novel transcends local colour to provide a universal allegory of contemporary times and their harsh conflicts.

The story is set in a dystopian flooded world suspended between land and sea, with the former inhabited by an elitist minority, the “landlockers,” while 90% of the population, the so-called “dampings,” struggle for daily survival on boats. The investigation of the spatial dimension, however, reveals that this rigid dichotomous structure is in fact undermined by a number of liminal places where characters from different worlds actually meet and exchange experience. The two female protagonists – Callanish and North, a landlocker and a damping respectively – are destined to bridge all gaps, and their “liminal” love is intended to mark the beginning of a new approach to reality, based on the acceptance of difference, contamination, and hybridity as the only way to salvation. Thus, the novel ends up challenging both realism and fantasy by engaging in a thorough rethinking of boundaries, of clear-cut distinctions between worlds, genders, and even literary genres.



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