

CLAI  
Comparative Literature  
Association of Ireland

Proceedings of the  
**Proceedings of the**  
Ist International Postgraduate Symposium  
**Ist International Postgraduate Symposium**  
Dublin City University, 2008  
**Dublin City University, 2008**

Edited by Bevin Doyle and Brigitte Le Juez

# **Editorial Board**

**Bevin Doyle: Dublin City University**

**Michael Kelly: University of Limerick**

**Caitríona Leahy: Trinity College Dublin**

**Brigitte Le Juez: Dublin City University**

**Emer O'Beirne: University College Dublin**

**Patricia O'Byrne: Dublin City University**

**Cormac O Cuilleainain: Trinity College Dublin**

**Diana Perez Garcia: St Patrick's College Drumcondra**

**Victoria Ríos Castaño: University of Ulster**

# Table of Contents

Foreword by	<b>Brigitte Le Juez</b>	4-5
Soffici & Apollinaire: <i>Chimismi, Alcools, Simultaneità</i> and <i>Calligrammes</i> between Futurism and Orphism	<b>Mila Milani</b>	6-18
A 'Foreign Reincarnation' – The Controversial Afterlife of Rabindranath Tagore's <i>The Home and the World</i>	<b>Marion Dalvai</b>	19-28
A New Compound: Dante's Guido in Prufrock's Hell	<b>Patrick Howard</b>	29-36
The Aesthetics of Dislocation: Liminality in José María Merino and Juan José Millás	<b>Patricia Garcia</b>	37-46
Poetic identities in times of flux: Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gaston Miron	<b>Muireann Leonard</b>	47-53
Animal Writing: José Ángel Valente and Giorgio Agamben	<b>Manus O'Duibhir</b>	54-65
Ekphrasis in Chaim Potok's <i>My Name is Asher Lev</i>	<b>Bevin Doyle</b>	66-74
Uses of the Carnavalesque in Pádraic Ó Conaire and Franz Kafka	<b>Zara Blake</b>	75-82
Notes on contributors		83-84

# Foreword

The newly formed Comparative Literature Association of Ireland (CLAI) was launched on Friday November 28, 2008 at the Royal Irish Academy, in Dublin. The launch celebrated the emergence and rapid growth of comparative literary studies in Ireland, as well as the spirit of genuine cooperation between the universities offering Comparative Literature programmes in Ireland.

The launch was followed on Saturday November 29 by the 1st International Postgraduate Symposium in Comparative Literature, hosted by the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies in Dublin City University. The symposium provided a forum for twenty-four new researchers in the field to present their work. The event was attended by over eighty participants, an extremely encouraging figure given that the discipline did not formally appear in Ireland until 2003, when the first postgraduate programme in Comparative Literature was created in DCU.

The objective of the symposium was to explore the latest theoretical and methodological practices in comparative studies, to provide a supportive environment for those coming to grips with presenting conference papers, and to offer a lively and stimulating forum for discussion and debate.

These objectives were fully realised, thanks to the enthusiasm of experienced academics representing most Irish universities (north and south) who encouraged their postgraduate students to attend, and who also supported the symposium through their own attendance. The symposium's success, however, was due, above all, to the postgraduate students themselves, and in particular to the wide and imaginative range of subjects they presented and the high quality of the papers they delivered. The articles included in this edition represent only a selection of these.

Lucia Boldrini graciously agreed to be our guest speaker. As a member of both the Executive Committee of the British Comparative Literature Association (BCLA) and of the Editorial Board of Comparative Critical Studies, and as General Coordinator of the European Network for Comparative Literary Studies (ENCLS/REELC), Lucia provided support and encouragement for what we wish to achieve in Ireland – the provision of an academic forum for the discussion, promotion and development of the discipline.

The selected papers in this first issue of the proceedings of our annual symposium range from a reappraisal of Ardengo Soffici's and Guillaume Apollinaire's artistic relationship (Mila Milani) to the comparative study of two writers, Pádraic Ó Conaire and Franz Kafka, who, although contemporaries of each other, were unaware of the other's work (Zara Blake). These papers illustrate that comparative literature examines not only demonstrable connections – fascinating as these can be, as evident in Marion Dalvai's study of the reception of Tagore – but also explores different types of links, such as those based on critical theory, or on considerations outside the realm of literature. Thus, other articles deal with possible connections between authors belonging to different cultures and different eras (authors like Dante and T. S. Eliot in Patrick Howard's paper), or between authors of the same culture and era whose works illustrate the evolution of a theme or a genre. Patricia Garcia, for instance, examines the subject of liminal space in contemporary Spanish literature, in a context where literature, in particular the fantastic, meets theoretical physics, psychology and anthropology. Through political considerations and questions of cultural identity, Muireann Leonard brings together two poets geographically close, within North America: Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gaston Miron. Philosophy and poetry also join forces in Manus O'Duibhir's article in order to develop the concept of animality in José Ángel Valente's work. Finally, literature and art merge to produce an ekphrastic novel, according to Bevin Doyle's analysis of Chaim Potok's work.

The variety of research interests displayed in this short volume is testimony to the fascinating and promising range of expertise to be found among our budding comparatists. One emerges from a reading of these papers with an enormous sense of encouragement and optimism about the future of comparative studies in Ireland.

Brigitte Le Juez

## Soffici & Apollinaire: *Chimismi*, *Alcools*, *Simultaneità* and *Calligrammes* between Futurism and Orphism

MILA MILANI  
*University of Bologna*

Critical literature on the Italian futurist poet Ardengo Soffici has often undervalued the importance of this poet, critic and painter to the relationship between Italian literature and French culture at the beginning of the twentieth century (Richter, 1969, excepted). Soffici, like other Italian contemporary artists, is often compared with Apollinaire, implying that the former relied on the latter regarding the use of *avant-garde* techniques.

However, in terms of introducing vanguard principles into twentieth-century Italian literature, Soffici's body of work is more complex and problematic. Soffici did not simply copy Apollinaire's methods of renewing artistic and literary languages, but proved to be a real innovator and 'contributor', as defined by the Italian critic Mario Richter (1990). Soffici trod a difficult path between a forced adherence to Futurism, the only movement to which he could belong in a conservative Italian cultural climate, despite the objectionable behaviour of its leader, Marinetti, and a personal love of Apollinaire, thus embarking on an artistic quest for literary renewal. Such a search for literary renewal corresponds with those of Apollinaire and Marinetti, but is closest to that of Apollinaire. According to Soffici, Apollinaire pushed his research to the extreme limits of the reason of possible, but the change he was looking for could not be either refusal or betrayal of humanism, of which Apollinaire himself was a product (1965a, p.414). With this awareness, Apollinaire became a *maître*, a fundamental reference model for Soffici in his progress towards the *avant-garde*, with whom Soffici could actively relate.

From a comparative analysis, following the chronology of the poems in Apollinaire's *Alcools* and *Calligrammes* and Soffici's *Bif§zf+18 Simultaneità e Chimismi Lirici*, it is apparent that their relationship was based on a reciprocal exchange of thematic concerns and stylistic techniques.

### **Joining the Futurists: *Chimismi* and *Calligrammes***

In 1913 Apollinaire published *Alcools*, where he was impelled to transcribe the concept of simultaneity into poetry, substituting thus the coexistence of all elements in each poem for the logics of discourse and the principle of selecting suitably poetic elements. In the same year Soffici started composing his *chimismi lirici* (lyric chemisms),<sup>1</sup> showing how deeply he felt the need to take part in the Futurist movement and to materialize this sense of belonging in his poetic work. Rather than become a simple 'clone' of Marinetti, he wanted to give voice to the desire for

renewal he had been feeling for years. However, since his futurist adhesion clashed with what he had previously claimed,<sup>2</sup> Soffici needed to have authorisation for this new artistic volte-face. This authorisation came in 1913 with Apollinaire's *Manifesto*, 'Futurist anti-tradition', published in *Lacerba*, in which he agreed with Futurism.<sup>3</sup>

Soffici's first lyric chemism appeared in the same journal. Here, Soffici achieves the disappearance of punctuation, as laid down by Marinetti in his 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' on May 11, 1912. However, the poem is not completely futurist; there is no variety of font, verbal usage and prepositions are still present, so the effect is not so dynamic as that claimed by Futurism. The title 'Still Life' is appropriate (Pietropaoli 2003), meaning that the composition is static, contained in circular forms which give the poem a geometric precision, closer to Braque's Cubism than to Boccioni's futurist paintings.

When another lyric chemism, 'Bicchiere d'acqua' [Glass of water] (Soffici 1915, p.75-77) was published in *Lacerba* on January 15, 1914, this represented for Soffici a clear passage to Futurism. The poem abounds with futurist features; the infinitives are repeated according to Marinetti's style ('dormire dormire' [to sleep to sleep]), while urban and artificial reference ('profumo elettrico della carne baciata estate d'affiches sulle guance delle città senza vergogna' [electric perfume of kissed meat shameless summer of affiches on the cheeks of the city]) advance together with calls for war and speed noisy ('rifluire rumoroso del sangue delle velocità delle guerre nei misticismi' [flowing of blood of speed of wars in mysticism]) (Pietropaoli 2003, p.220). The poem ends with a sequence of nouns, only linked together by analogy and by the 'imagination without strings', as defined by Marinetti: 'voluttà morte promessa spring scoppio uragano meccanico di nuove primavere [...]. Sfera pirotecnica della fantasia al caffè' [voluptuous death promise spring explosion mechanical hurricane of new springs (...). Pyrotechnics sphere of coffee fantasy].

However, what really matters here are Soffici's new typographical choices; the poem highlights some words in bold type. Furthermore, Soffici shifts from achromatic art to a preoccupation with the movement of colour, such as the image of iridescent water: 'Rotazione di prismi nella serenità dell'acqua' [Spin of prisms in the serenity of water]. The colours of the spectrum are listed in quick succession, appearing on the page as if flung by the painter's brush directly onto the canvas resulting in a chromatic intensification typical of the futurist school.

'Bicchiere d'acqua' is notable not only for Soffici's adhesion to Futurist schemes of composition, but especially for this first, schematic calligram to which Soffici gave birth. The calligram is a *calembour plastique*, as defined by Queneau, or rather a new kind of language which breaks the formal linearity of the poem, abandoning the strophe in the name of a new typography. This new figurative feature changes the whole dynamics of the poem; on one hand the calligram is visual and graphic and, on the other, discursive and verbal, without separating the two levels. The graphic disposition of the words, considered as elements of a painting, displays the topic of the poem, whilst the linguistic signs develop the lyrical content (Sacks-Galey 1988). Soffici's 'Bicchiere d'acqua' embodies the beginning of this figurative revolution, reproducing the iris in poetic form, and using words to show the seven colours of the spectrum bleeding into white:



**ROSSO** profumo elettrico della carne baciata estate d'affiches sulle guance delle città senza vergogna **ARANCIONE** mare del sud in amore strade notturne gonfie di calcoli al ritmo prostituto delle serenate **GIALLO** labbra dell'ironia nel novembre dei cimiteri strazio di un cielo sugli autunni teatrali delle vetrature

**VERDE** stemperamento velenoso di gemme bagno dell'anima nell'aritmetica dei viaggi delle traversate sguardi di pupille giovani verso la vita fuoco complementare **AZZURRO** eternità dell'intelligenza migrazione delle nostalgie nel cerchio degli assoluti senza cuore

**INDACO** rifluire rumoroso del sangue delle velocità delle guerre nei misticismi prostrati golfo stazione dell'esistenza allucinata in pressione di partenza **VIOLETTO**

**ULTRAVIOLETTO NERO**

voluttà morte promessa spring scoppio uragano

(Soffici 1915, p.76 and p.77)

Clearly this strategy, in which linguistic signs assume both iconic and verbal value, was still in an embryonic stage at this point. Although Apollinaire was arguably able to achieve more interesting results, richer in terms of lyric intensity, it is possible that Soffici's 'Bicchiera d'acqua' might have influenced Apollinaire's own work. Indeed, the first *calligrammes* were published later in the same year in *Les Soirées de Paris*, and 'Il pleut' [It rains] belongs to them, despite its publication in December 1916. In that poem, five oblique lines simulate the rain, covering the space on the page from top to bottom and from left to right. In this way vertical movement gives the letters a logical meaning, whereas the horizontal one gives them a poetic continuity. The space of the page may be considered as part of the poem, like Soffici's iris, representing thus a window; this hypothesis might explain why the raindrops are not completely lined up. This new figurative dimension disrupts the conventional symbolic universe of the poem, so here the window, usually a symbol of opening towards the external

world, represents instead an obstacle, and the raindrops, as they shatter in its transparency, could be seen as representing the poet's tears (see Sacks Galey 1988).

## IL PLEUT

il pleut des voix de femmes comme si elle étaient mortes même dans le souvenir  
 et vous aussi qui pleut merveilles rencontres de vie ô gouttelettes  
 et ces nuages cabrés se prennent à hennir tout un univers de ville auriculaires  
 écoute si pleut tandis que le regret et le dédain pleurent une ancienne musique  
 à conte tomber les liens qui retiennent en haut et en bas

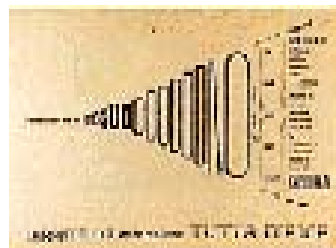
(Apollinaire 1925, p.64)

In 'Caffé', published on May 1st, 1914, another feature can be stressed: polyglotism. This is remarkable, indeed, since French, English and Spanish words come as a broken discourse to the poet's ears, while he is sat down in 'a modern café': *'Tu as vu comme il est bien chaussé?, Si vas à Calatayud Pregunta por la Dolores Es una chica guapa, ah! Ben non zut pas pour toute la nuit je ne marche pas* and what a damn'd pimp!' (Soffici 1915, p.80). The reader is thus caught in a whirl of billboard slogans, typical of futurist *reclamismo*. The poet does not transcribe the whirl of noises, but recreates the affiches seen by his eyes on the page:



(Soffici 1915, p.102)

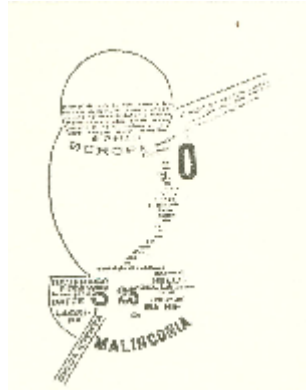
A similar method is used by Apollinaire in his 'Lettre-Océan', published on June 15, 1914 in *Les Soirées de Paris*. Here, Spanish words which reproduce a letter sent from Mexico ('republica mexicana tarjeta postal' and 'Correos Mexico 4 centavos') are mixed with English ('U.S. Postage 2 cents 2') and more hidden Italian words ('Evviva il Papa'). This polyglotism is borrowed from Soffici, but Apollinaire's poem is richer than the Italian poet's. Firstly, bold capital letters are used to point out the different focuses of the poem, dividing the space of the page and underlying the transition from one element to another. This is different from a Futurist use of typography, whose aim was to exasperate the traditional strophe. However, Apollinaire is likely to have considered futurist *tavole parolibere* while composing his calligram. This may be inferred from the repetitions of 'hou' which progressively reduce their size, as appears in Francesco Cangiullo's poem 'Piedigrotta':



Furthermore 'Lettre-Océan' borrows wavy lines to represent the sea waves and also deploys the technique of radial structures, which become here more complex than the treble ones in Cangiullo's 'Piedigrotta' (Jannini 1983).



Similar features can be found in Soffici's 'Tipografia' and 'Al Buffet della stazione'. In the first poem the fonts crowd chaotically, bunching into four different focal points, avoiding the representation of a centre of discourse. The words 'alfabeti lettere dentelles batiste fiocchi' [alphabets letters dentelles batistes bows], which convey the metapoetic meaning of 'Tipografia', appear side by side with the figurative elements, but do not merge together as in Apollinaire's calligrams. However, in 'Al Buffet della stazione', first published on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914 in *Lacerba*, the linguistic features encroach on the figurative ones, and the font drawing the forms is part of the canvas. Nevertheless, the build-up of nouns does not reveal a complete symbiosis between words and figures, unlike 'Il pleut'.



(‘Al Buffet della stazione’. Soffici 1915, p.97)

In fact, although Apollinaire often draws on Futurist techniques, including Soffici's, he manages to achieve more complex results. In 'Lettre-Océan', for example, Apollinaire creates coherence among the different elements through the notion of simultaneity. This is not a simultaneity of perception – it would be impossible for the reader to register, from an intellectual point of view, all the discourses which explode at the same time – but a 'simultaneity of expression' (Sacks-Galey 1988, p.76) where the poet is able to describe what suddenly passes through his mind. This kind of simultaneity is more challenging than the one achieved by Futurism. The union of 'Lettre', clearly the bearer of a communicative message, and 'Océan' enlarge the perspective of the calligram, by giving it a double sense. On one hand, 'Océan' qualifies the word 'Lettre' but, on the other hand, the resultant expression is not clear: does it mean that the letter is vast as the ocean, sharing its fluidity and its eternal movement, or does it exist as an ocean of letters and sentences which one can read and associate in infinite and oceanic ways? Here, the simultaneity appears to pervade the language itself.

### **Divorce to Futurism: *Simultaneità* and *Alcools***

By 1915 the relationship between Soffici and Futurism had begun to deteriorate, and compromise with Marinettism was quite impossible. At this point, Soffici devoted himself to the composition of new poetic works, the *Simultaneità*, thus resuming a project started in 1912 and immediately abandoned when he went over to Futurism. The same project was carried out in 1912-1913 by Apollinaire. As defined by Soffici, in *Primi principi di un'estetica futurista* the *simultaneità* are:

Fasci di immagini (di forme e colori, di ritmi) condotti di lontano, dalle profondità di una coscienza lirica in moto, vibrante, veloce, e associate intuitivamente in un nesso sintetico, metalogico... (Soffici 1965b, p.733)

[Bundles of images (of forms and colours and rhythms) coming from far away, from the depths of a fast wavering lyric consciousness in motion, which are intuitively associated in a synthetic and metalogic link...]

As a brilliant critic, Soffici is able to give an exhaustive description of his poetry. The ingredients are clearly listed: the 'I', which Marinetti wanted destroyed, returns after the experimental chemisms, since the poet cannot 'spogliarsi della sua sensibilità umana' [get rid of his human sensibility (Curi 1995, p.84)] and 'aderire alle radici dei fenomeni' [adhere to the roots of phenomena (Curi 2001, p.148)].

The most important element in the *simultaneità* is indeed Apollinaire's *Alcools*. They were published in *Mercure de France* at the end of April 1913, and Soffici must have seen *Alcools* that same Spring, since Apollinaire writes to him on July 4<sup>th</sup>: 'Je vous enverrai *Alcools* dans peu de jours. Je suis heureux qu'il vous plaise. Mon livre fait réagir les gens' ['I'm sending to you *Alcools* in a few days' time. I'm happy that you like it. My work makes people react' (Soffici 1920, p.234)]. Apollinaire's influence is evident in terms of themes, such as melancholy and antiquity. 'Arcobaleno', published on May 8, 1915 in *Lacerba* is emblematic in that sense. In 'Zone' Apollinaire varied the traditional narrative expression, turning the pronoun 'I' into two components: *je*, to identify the poet, his current activities and feelings, and *tu* (*you*), denoting the poet in the present, as well as the poet in his childhood (Richter 1969).

Maintenant tu marches dans Paris tout seul parmi la foule  
Des troupeaux d'autobus mugissants près de toi roulent [...]  
Te voici à Coblenz à l'hôtel du Géant... (Apollinaire 1965b, 'Zone', p.39)

[Now you stride alone through the Paris crowds  
Buses in bellowing herds roll by [...]  
You in Coblenz at the Hôtel du Géant... (Apollinaire 1965a, p.569)]

Soffici deals with the topic in a similar way:

Come nel 1902 tu sei a Parigi in una soffitta  
Coperto da 35 centimetri quadri di cielo [...]  
La Ville t'offre ancora ogni mattina  
Il bouquet fiorito dello Square de Cluny  
Dal boulevard Saint-Germain scoppiante di  
Tram e d'autobus... (Soffici 1915, p.17)

[Like in 1902 *you* are in Paris in an attic  
Covered by 35 square centimeters of sky [...]  
Every morning *la ville* offers *you*  
the flower bouquet of *Square de Cluny*  
From *boulevard Saint-Germain* bursting with  
Trams and buses... (my italics)]

*You* is repeated to create a simultaneous harmony, while the feeling of belonging to the modern city, namely Paris, enters Soffici's writing thanks to Apollinaire.

Whilst typographical strategies were typical of *Chimismi*, in *Simultaneità* Apollinaire's melancholic tone prevails, especially in the poet's solitary promenades

around the city where his perception of passing time is outlined. These themes also nourish *Alcools* and are reflected through the main poems, such as ‘La chanson du mal-aimé’:

Un soir de demi-brume à Londres  
Un voyou qui ressemblait à  
Mon amour vint à ma rencontre [...]  
  
Je suivis ce mauvais garçon  
Qui sifflait mains dans les poches  
Nous semblions entre les maisons  
Onde ouverte de la Mer Rouge  
Lui les Hébreux moi Pharaon (Apollinaire 1965b, p.46)

[One misty dusk in London  
A hoodlum resembling  
My love came to meet me [...]  
  
I followed that lawless boy  
Whistling his hands thrust in his pockets  
Between the houses  
Gaping Red Sea waters  
I was Pharaoh he the Hebrews (Apollinaire 1965a, p.67)]

Wandering around the city (in this case London, rather than Paris) in night alleys, suffering for a lost love, and feeling a deep bitterness for the loss of his own dignity in shadowing a random hoodlum and, clinging to the hope that it might be his lover, creates an atmosphere of alienation, heightened by this application of the metaphor of the Jews persecuted by an Egyptian Pharaoh to the relatively trivial setting of closing time of the London pubs. Soffici works on a variation of this theme in ‘Correnti’, published on August 15, 1915 in *Lacerba*:

Ho le mani piene di brividi colti in molti letti  
di seta e di miseria  
Cammino nella solitudine come un santo fuor di stagione  
Il principe Scerbatof milionario mi fa pagar  
La corsa in automobile ai Campi Elisi... (Soffici 1915, p.68)<sup>4</sup>

[My hands are full of shivers picked up in many beds  
of silk and misery  
I walk alone as a saint out of season  
The millionaire prince Scherbatoff makes me pay  
The car trip to the Elysian Fields...]

Furthermore, it can be seen that the theme of antiquity, unacceptable to Futurism, is hinted at in Soffici’s *Simultaneità* as in Apollinaire’s *Alcools*. In ‘Luci di Roma’, indeed, Soffici recalls the past and present glory:

E come una liquefazione subitanea di fuoco profondamente in mezzo  
a tutto Roma  
crogiuolo d’eternità di storie di destini e bellezze Roma  
Lontani giorni maturi zaffiri d’eroismo solitudini d’altri tempi e popoli

luci pregnanti verzure  
Ricordi di forza quasi un sangue che fu tutta la nostra ribollente  
giovent... (Soffici 1915, p.38)

[And as a sudden liquefaction of fire deeply among all Rome  
melting pot of eternity of stories of destinies and beauties Rome  
Far-away days mature sapphires of heroism past solitudes and people  
lights weighty greenery  
Memories of strength like blood which was our bubbling youth...]

In Apollinaire the references to antiquity are less explicit, and often veiled by metaphors (in 'La Chanson du Mal-Aimé' Ulysses' adventures are compared to the poet's sufferings) but they are always present. Apollinaire moved in a different cultural universe to the Latin one to which Soffici belonged, and he developed an interest in Nordic mythology during the years he spent in Germany. The *Rhénanes* section in *Alcools* is inspired by references to the saga of the Nibelungs and often evokes such creatures as Undines or Lorelei. However, although Apollinaire deals with a mythological, and not a real past, an affection for the past antithetical to Futurist ambitions to destroy history can be detected in the works of both poets. Thus renewal does not come from the destruction of antiquity, but through the poetic techniques used in introducing that theme.

### **Soffici's originality in *Simultaneità***

Despite the clear influence of Apollinaire, Soffici's art retains its individuality. Although Soffici is unable to reproduce either the music of Apollinaire's poems or the *calembours*, Soffici's skills lie in his chromatic touches. Soffici was both poet and painter, and thanks to this double face could literally colour his poems, creating reflections, fringes or collages, as though his poems were a cubist canvas.

In 'Specchio', for instance, a chord is struck between 'rosa profondo' [deep pink] and the bright red of 'fiamme multicolori' [multicoloured flames], while the blue gradually loses its warmer nuances in a transformation to take on the pale luminescence of crystal. In 'Aeroplano', the sky becomes a phantasmagoria of reflections:

frrrrr frrrrr frrrrr affogo nel turchino ghimé  
mangio triangoli di turchino di mammola  
fette d'azzurro  
In-gollo bocks di turchino cobalto  
celeste di lapis lazuli  
celeste blu celeste chiaro celestino  
blu di prussica celeste cupo celeste lumiera. (Soffici 1915, p.68)

[frrrrr frrrrr frrrrr I'm drowning in *ghimé* turquoise  
I'm eating triangles of violet turquoise  
slices of light blue  
I'm knocking back bocks of cobalt blue  
light blue of lapis lazuli  
light blue blue light blue light little light blue  
Prussian blue heavenly dark heavenly light.]

Objects lose their definition as the colours bleed into them. These new colours bring with them feelings and emotions: ‘il cubo nero il pensiero del ritorno che cancello con la mia lingua accesa e lo sguardo di gioia’ [the black cube is the thought of coming back I rub with my light tongue and the joyful look]. ‘Transustanziazione dell’arcobaleno’ [A transubstantiation of rainbow (Soffici 1915, p.63)] materialises and the colours incorporate the substance of the objects into chromatic games, in epidermic varieties which reflect themselves in the lines and allow Soffici to create a genuinely original effect. This is more successful than Soffici’s attempts to reproduce Apollinaire’s simultaneous techniques. Thanks to his background in painting, Soffici created in one poetic instant a panorama of many emotions, different places and times, a simultaneity of tones which is truly innovative. Apollinaire himself recognizes this quality in Soffici:

Mon cher Ardengo,  
 J’ai reçu ton livre et l’ai lu dans la journée avec une grande joie poétique [...] C’est une œuvre très importante et pleine de beautés neuves. (Soffici 1920, p.315)

[My dear Ardengo,  
 I received your book and I read it today with a big poetic joy. [...] It is a very significant work and full of new beautiful features. (my translation)]

### **The mysterious order of *Bif§zf* + 18 *Simultaneità e Chimismi Lirici***

One problem remains. As stated in the analysis carried out, the *Simultaneità* followed the *Chimismi* chronologically. However, they were published by the Vallecchi publishing house, at Soffici’s request, in the opposite order. The reader who is philologically unaware thus considers the *Simultaneità* to be the first stages in Soffici’s writing career and views the *Chimismi* as the final steps of his production, making Soffici appear as an assertive Futurist who passes from ‘free verse to words in freedom’, in the mold of Marinetti’s dictate. However, in 1915, Soffici broke up all connections with Marinetti, ratifying this split by composing the *Simultaneità* while Marinetti was moving on from simultaneities and going towards the destruction of the poetic ‘I’. Thus we are faced with a paradox, which critical literature on Soffici has not yet been able to solve unanimously.

In the light of the preceding analysis, there is a possible solution to this problem. The use of Vallecchi’s order in *Bif§zf+18 Simultaneità e chimismi lirici* may not be the result of a desire on Soffici’s part to adhere to Marinetti’s techniques, since Soffici appeared to follow the orphic vocation rather than Marinetti’s theory that destruction of the *ego* leads to its fusion with the matter itself. Our hypothesis considers Apollinaire’s influence on Soffici. They take opposite paths: Soffici passes from futurist poems to free verse, while Apollinaire passes from free verse to calligrams. If Soffici had published the *Chimismi* before the *Simultaneità*, this would have meant a sort of involution compared to his *maître à penser*. The non-chronological ordering of the poems in the Vallecchi collection could have suggested instead the existence of a relationship between Soffici and Apollinaire characterised by reciprocal influences, proving not only the strength of the bond between the two poets, but also between literary Italy and France at the beginning of twentieth century.

On July 15, 1918 Apollinaire himself noted Soffici’s importance to European art in his essay *Les arts à Paris*, referring to Soffici’s role in enlivening and broadening the Italian literary world through frequent introductions of French culture. Despite

Apollinaire's clear influence on him, Soffici cannot be considered as a mere clone, but as an artist whose art is the result of artistic air breathed in dynamic Paris, in beloved Tuscany and in futurist Milan and is nourished by his triple roles of poet, painter and critic.

Ardengo Soffici is not unknown in Paris. A writer and artist, he was the designer for the editions of *La Plume*, which published Moréas's works with his illustrations. Ardent and restless, Soffici introduced into Italy the most daring and most significant French artists of the last few generations, including Degas, Cézanne, Henri Rousseau, Matisse, Picasso and Braque. He was also a defender of the sculptor Rosso. Loyal, independent, and impartial, Soffici is bound by ties of friendship to the group of poet-critics such as Guillaume Apollinaire, André Salmon, and Roger Allard, who all defended with conviction and success the painters of the new generations abandoned by the professional critics (Apollinaire 1960, p.468). Or to put it another way, using Soffici's line in '*Correnti*': 'Una gran gioia d'essere questo accumulatore [corsivo mio] in mezzo alla storia' [A big joy is being such an *accumulator* in the middle of history (Soffici 1915, p.40 – my translation and my italics)].

### Bibliography:

- APOLLINAIRE, G., 1925. *Calligrammes*. Paris: Poésie-Gallimard
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1960. Chronique d'arts. In: L. C. Breunig (ed.) *Apollinaire on art: essays and reviews 1902–1918*. London: Thames and Hudson
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1965a. *Alcools*. Los Angeles: University of California Press
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1965b. *Œuvres poétiques*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard
- BERGMAN, P., 1962. "Modernolatria" et "Simultaneità". *Recherches sur deux tendances dans l'avant-garde littéraire en Italie et en France à la veille de la première guerre mondiale*. Stockholm: Svenska Bokförlaget Bonnier
- CANGIULLO, F., 1916. *Piedigrotta. Parole in libertà. Col manifesto sulla declamazione dinamica sinottica di Marinetti*. Milan: Edizioni futuriste di "Poesia".
- CURI, F., 1995. *Tra mimesi e metafora – Studi su Marinetti e il futurismo*, Bologna: Pendragon
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2001. *La poesia italiana d'avanguardia, Modi e tecniche*. Naples: Liguori
- JANNINI, P., 1983. Tavole parolibere / *Calligrammes*, Apollinaire e Cangiullo. In: *Apollinaire – Les actes de la journée Apollinaire*. Fribourg: Editions universitaires
- MEAZZI, B., 1997. Le Manifeste de l'Antitradition Futuriste: Apollinaire et le futurisme. In M. Décaudin & S. Zoppi (eds.) *Guillaume Apollinaire devant les avant-gardes européennes – 17<sup>e</sup> Colloque Apollinaire, Stavelot 30 août-2 septembre 1995*. Rome: Bulzoni
- PIERI, P., 2005. *Futurismo milanese / futurismo fiorentino: Marinetti, Papini, Soffici, Palazzeschi*. Ravenna: Allori
- PIETROPAOLI, A., 2003. *Poesie in libertà, Govoni Palazzeschi Soffici*, Naples: Guida

RICHTER, M., 1969. *La formazione francese di Ardengo Soffici (1900-1914)*. Milan: Vita e pensiero

\_\_\_\_\_, 1990. *Apollinaire. Il rinnovamento della scrittura poetica all'inizio del Novecento*. Bologna: il Mulino

SACKS-GALEY, P., 1988. *Calligramme ou écriture figurée. Apollinaire inventeur de formes*, Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard

SOFFICI, A., 1912. Ancora sul Futurismo. *In: La Voce* IV, pp.852-873

\_\_\_\_\_, 1915. *Bifszf + 18 Simultaneità e Chimismi Lirici*, Florence: Vallecchi (2002 photographic reproduction of the 1919 edition)

\_\_\_\_\_, 1920. 36 lettere anonime di Guillaume Apollinaire. *In: Rete Mediterranea* I, pp.230-375.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1965a. *Opere*, Florence: Vallecchi, vol. IV.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1965b. *Opere*, Florence: Vallecchi, vol. I.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> All translations from the Italian are mine.
- 2 'Il guaio del futurismo consiste in quelli che lo rappresentano, in come lo rappresentano, e non nella sua essenza di movimento rinnovatore -che eccellente' [the trouble with Futurism is those who represent it, how they represent it, but not in its essence as a movement of renewal – which is excellent] (Soffici 1912, p.852). The relationship between Soffici and Futurism is complex: first Soffici refused it, then he accepted it, until the split in 1915 (Pieri 2005).
- 3 For further details concerning the meaning of Apollinaire's *Manifesto*, which might represent Apollinaire's intent to agree to renewal movements, as well as his need to satisfy his *nature présidentielle*, see (Meazzi 1997) and (Bergman 1962).
- 4 However, in Soffici we can detect a dream state rather than deep melancholic pathos (Curi 2001).

## A 'Foreign Reincarnation' – The Controversial Afterlife of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*

MARION DALVAI  
*Trinity College Dublin*

Reception processes are difficult to investigate, as Els Adringa points out, but '[they] become manifest in a wide variety of forms: in the selection and transformation of the works, the attention given to them by publishers, reviewers, essayists and academics, the reactions of the buying and reading public.' (2006, p.201) In this paper, I will investigate some of these manifestations of the reception process, using as an example a novel by the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, *Ghare Baire* (1916), translated into English as *The Home and the World*.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the first Asian writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. After meeting Tagore in 1912, William Butler Yeats tells Ezra Pound that Tagore is someone 'greater than any of us' (Pound 1913, p.573) and in his introduction to *Gitanjali* he prophesies an extraordinary future for Tagore and his work. Yeats and Pound are convinced of Tagore's genius when they first meet him; and, in 1931, Albert Einstein calls the Indian writer a 'Seer.' (R. Chatterjee 1990, p.12) However, as Edward C. Dimock states, by 1959, while Tagore 'lives today in Bengal as he did fifty years ago [...] for most non-Indians, he is no longer living. He is an isolated figure. For us, he is not part of a living tradition.' (1959, p.34) In 1966, Nabaneeta Sen complains about the fact that 'the name of Rabindranath Tagore no longer ranks among the greater literary figures of his time' (1966, p.275) and, by the late 1980s, Mary Lago is forced to admit that 'in the West today, Tagore is known to relatively few, and not all of those comprehend his immense significance as both a literary and a political figure.' (1989, p.5) What factors were at play in the Western world to reduce Tagore to a marginal figure in literature by 1960? And what has changed in the last twenty years in which Tagore has slowly been re-introduced into the canon of world literature?

Macmillan published *The Home and the World* in 1919. Sixty-five years later (in 1985) the novel was published again, this time by Penguin, with an introduction by Anita Desai. This edition was reissued in 1990. We still find Desai's introduction in the latest UK edition (2005) along with a new preface by William Radice, additional notes, chronology and further reading. Significantly, by 2005, *The Home and the World* is considered a Penguin Classic. So, what has happened to make the novel a classic? And what does the future hold for *The Home and the World*, which has been condemned as 'a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind' (Lukács 1983, p.8) and praised as 'the best picture of Bengal's time of political awakening' and for 'its human interest and its literary merit'? (Thompson 1991, p.246)

Tagore was fifty years old when his friend, the English painter William Rothenstein, introduced him to the West. Celebrated as a literary sensation as soon as

he appeared on London's cultural scene in 1912, Tagore published *Gitanjali* in English and 'on the strength principally of this volume' (Lago 1989, p.1) was awarded the Nobel Prize the following year. Both Pound and Yeats proofread and corrected his translation of *Gitanjali* from Bengali; Tagore asked Rothenstein to thank Yeats for helping his poems 'in their perilous adventure of a foreign reincarnation.' (Rothenstein 1940, p.111) Tagore was aware of the fact that texts change in translation and that readers' expectations change as soon as the language changes – this is clear when one takes a closer look at the English version of Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire*. But before we turn to the English text and its reception in Europe, we need to take a look at the novel's reception in India when it was first published. The novel received harsh criticism both in Europe and India, but for very different reasons.

### **A short-lived scandal – reception in India**

*The Home and the World* has three first-person narrators: Bimala, Nikilhesh and Sandip. Bimala marries Nikilhesh who has just returned to India after his studies in England. He feels strongly that his wife should come out of *purdah*.<sup>1</sup> When Bimala steps out of her home into the world, she falls in love with Nikilhesh's friend, Sandip, the local leader of the *Swadeshi* movement.<sup>2</sup> Sandip is a passionate and active man, the opposite of the peace-loving and somewhat passive Nikhil. Nikhil soon realizes that his wife has feelings for Sandip but decides not to intervene leaving Bimala to decide which man she wants to be with. In the end, Bimala stays with her husband.

*Ghare Baire* was published in serialized form in the journal *Sabuj Patra* (Green Leaves) between 1915 and 1916. At first, it caused a huge scandal amongst literary critics and the general readership in Bengal.<sup>3</sup> Most Bengalis of the time found the novel immoral, and attacked it because of the triangular love it depicts. However, triangular love was quite a common *trope* ever since Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay introduced the novel to Bengal in the nineteenth century. In *Ghare Baire*, Tagore uses the same *trope* as Chattopadhyay, but his novel has more psychological depth, and integrates political and social issues as well. The authorial voice is completely absent; there is no mediation between the different voices in the novel. What seems to have scandalized the contemporary readers in Bengal most was the fact that Bimala's voice is the most distinct in the novel. Is Bimala the description of a real Hindu woman? She cannot be, at least in the minds of many readers in 1915/16, because she is challenging traditionally accepted rules about a woman's place in society. Moreover, Tagore was accused of undermining Bengali nationalism because critics identified the character Nikhilesh with the historical Tagore; when Nikhilesh criticizes the *Swadeshi* movement, this is seen as a direct reflection of the author's rejection of the nationalist movement. Finally, when Sandip makes a derogatory remark about the Hindu goddess Sita, Tagore is accused of irreverence. Tagore's answer to these accusations is that a work of literature must be seen as a work of art and not as a manual of moral instruction.<sup>4</sup> This was a revolutionary thought in Bengal where most people 'still favoured the nineteenth-century dictum that the novel was not only a personal communication from the author to the reader, but also a vehicle for delivering a moral message.' (Chattopadhyay in Datta 2005, p.193) The literary scene changed very quickly in the 1920s and, in a sudden reversal of fortunes, within fifteen years from its publication, the novel enters the canon of national literature in India.

*The Home and the World* was translated into English by Surendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's nephew, and was first published serially as *The Home and Outside* in

the *Modern Review* in 1918 and then in book form in 1919. Although Surendranath Tagore is named as the translator, Rabindranath Tagore himself was involved in the translation – but to what extent is not clear. In a letter to Macmillan, Tagore writes: ‘A large part of it I have done myself and it has been carefully revised.’ (2005, p.viii) Because of the author’s involvement in the translation, *The Home and the World* is not simply seen as translation but as a hybrid textual form between translated and original text – or even a new original. Before discussing the differences between the Bengali and the English text, allow me a brief excursus on translation theory in India.

### **Writing translation as a rite of passage – Indian translation theory**

In the foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938), Rajo Rao describes the dilemma Indian writers face when they decide to use the English language in their writing:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. [...] English is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up [...]. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. (Rao 2006, p.276)

On several occasions, Tagore voiced Rao’s concern: apologizing for his English, yet writing in and translating into English himself, as well as supervising and revising translations of his works done by his nephew and his followers in the university of Santiniketan (which he founded).

The notion of translation in India, however, is quite different from that of other cultures. Translation is described as transcreation, as the transmigration of souls, or, in Tagore’s words, as ‘foreign reincarnation.’ As Dora Sales Salvador (2005, p.194) points out, in India,

... literary translation is not merely a transposition of significance or signs; the transfer is not only a linguistic one: it is an aesthetic enterprise that has a relevant bearing on the field of literary history, theory, criticism and reader response. The competence required is cultural and sensitive rather than merely linguistic.

Translation is an aesthetic and audience-oriented activity. Tagore did subscribe to this view – this emerges clearly when one analyses the differences between *Ghare Baire* and *The Home and the World*. In his essays on Indian translation theory, Purusottama Lal, a professor, translator and publisher from Calcutta, writes:

What is crucial is the epiphany of the passage – its emotional heart. This is the real problem before the translator or the transcreator or transformer, and conveying it accurately is what translation or transcreation is all about. We all have different notions of accuracy. (in Sales Salvador 2005, p.194-195)

The register of translation theories in India is quite culture-specific, and has distinct religious undertones: epiphany, transmigration of souls, reincarnation. It suggests a different approach to the act of translation and to language, in general. In the Indian view of translation, the transcreations or reincarnations of texts have their own lives and take a certain degree of autonomy from the original. This is also the case with Tagore’s novel. So, what are the most striking differences between the two texts?

## Differences between *Ghare Baire* and *The Home and the World*

As far as structure is concerned, the English novel is divided into twelve chapters, which is not the case with the Bengali text which simply consists of twenty-three 'stories', ten narrated by Bimala, eight by Nikilhesh and five by Sandip. However, what is called a 'story' in English is not a story but 'atmakatha' in the original, which is 'something more than a mere story, – the exposition of one's *atman* or innermost heart.' (Kundu 2001, p.22) Also, the division into chapters in the English version is 'planned according to the new developments in the plot' (*ibid.*, p.71). Thus, the English novel seems more plot-oriented than the Bengali original which is a character-centred novel of ideas.

Certain parts of the Bengali text have not been translated into English, sentences and paragraphs that Tagore feared might upset the English readership. Similarly, whenever a sentence could be read politically or as overtly anti-British, Tagore adds paragraphs to bring the discourse back into the personal realm of Bimala's relationship to the two men.

Finally, there is a significant difference in register. Bengali has two forms: the formal *sadhubhasha* that relies heavily on Sanskrit and the more colloquial *chalitbhasha*. Before *Ghare Baire*, Tagore had used *chalitbhasha* only in his diaries and personal letters, as well as in one epistolary short story, *Streer Patra* (*The Wife's Letter*). *Ghare Baire* is the first novel to be written in the more colloquial form of Bengali – 'its forms are used to explore [...] the making of the self.' (Datta 2005, p.8) Thus, *Ghare Baire* is the first Bengali psychological novel with its own particular language. The register in the English translation, however, is far from colloquial. It is difficult to determine what in the translation is Rabindranath's and what is Surendranath's doing, but one thing is clear: the register and style are rather Victorian and far from revolutionary. The English translation must have read as quite old-fashioned even in 1918 and 1919 – at a time when parts of Joyce's *Ulysses* were serialized in England and America, showing to what revolutionary use the English language could be put. Is this simply because Bengali is a much more floral language than English and Surendranath (or Rabindranath) Tagore did not possess enough linguistic competence to realize how old-fashioned their English sounded? This, at least, was the argument of many Bengali literary critics when confronted with the poor reception of the novel in the West. Or might the choice of register in the English have been based on a very distinct idea about the 'standard' language in the English novel? We can only speculate about the reasons that led Rabindranath and Surendranath Tagore to modify the English text, but there is a clear awareness that there are certain expectations in the English readership that differ from those in the Bengali readership.<sup>5</sup>

## The Wise Man from the Orient, a 'wholly insignificant figure'

Typically Western expectations and assumptions brought to the novel are reasons for the poor reception of *The Home and the World* in the English-speaking world, along with the reductive image of Tagore in the West and the developments in literary criticism between 1920 and 1980.

*The Home and the World* was received with mixed feelings in Europe. William Butler Yeats felt positive about this novel and Tagore's autobiography, but was disappointed with what he felt were poor translations of Tagore's poems.<sup>6</sup> In Germany, *The Home and the World* became one of Tagore's best-known books. 'You simply *must* read [it] – the finest novel I've read for a long time', a friend told Albert Einstein in mid-1920. In his review, Hermann Hesse refers to the novel's 'purity and grandeur', and Bertolt Brecht notes in his diary: 'A wonderful book, strong and gentle.'<sup>7</sup> However, two prominent literary critics of the time, E. M. Forster and George Lukács, had less flattering things to say about the novel.

E. M. Forster is very harsh in his judgement. Although he finds the theme 'beautiful', he also states: 'Throughout the book one is puzzled by bad tastes that verge upon bad taste.' He calls Bimala's and Sandip's mutual attraction a simple 'boarding-house flirtation', completely ignoring that, in a radically different culture such as India, even this innocuous flirt was thought to be outrageous, as the first reactions in Bengal clearly show. Most of all, Forster deplores the language, which he refers to as 'Babu sentences.' Forster is quick in blaming the translation for this: 'Was there some rococo charm that vanished in translation, or is it an experiment that has not quite come off?' (Forster 1983, p.365-7) Forster concludes that this must be a failed experiment. Clearly, Forster could not relate to the text. What happens when readers cannot relate to a text?

There are two ways of rethinking your reading experiences when a text fails to respond to the strategies with which it is approached: you can keep the text and change the strategy, or you can keep the strategy and toss out the text on the assumption that it is thin or incoherent. (Rabinowitz, 1997, p. 211)

Forster did exactly this: he tossed the text out.

In his review of the German translation of *The Home and the World*, entitled 'Tagore's Ghandi Novel',<sup>8</sup> Lukács claims that 'Tagore's enormous popularity among Germany's intellectual elite is one of the cultural scandals occurring with ever greater intensity again and again.' Not only does he feel that the novel is 'a petit bourgeois yarn of the shoddiest kind' and Tagore himself, for him, is 'a wholly insignificant figure [...] whose creative powers do not even stretch to a decent pamphlet. He lacks the imagination even to calumniate convincingly and effectively.' (Lukács 1983, p.8-11) One of the most influential Marxist literary critics at that time, Lukács approaches the text with a whole set of assumptions and expectations; he reads the novel looking for a clearly expressed political statement and thus finds nothing worthy in it, completely ignoring its psychological aspects and its genre (it is, after all, a novel of ideas). When it comes to European writers, Lukács will occasionally admit that art does not always have to be political (as he does when talking about Dostoyevsky and Strindberg) but when confronted with *The Home and the World*, he 'subscribed to a rather simple version of the parallelism between literature and politics.' (K. Chatterjee in Kundu, p.113) In line with his prescriptive theories, Lukács expected Tagore to make a political statement or adopt a certain style – when he did not find these aspects in the novel, in a strategy clearly described by Rabinowitz, he thought the novel to be thin and incoherent.

In 1996, Andrew Robinson and Krishna Dutta published a book entitled *Rabindranath Tagore – The Myriad-Minded Man*, trying to shine light onto aspects of Tagore's life not known in the West. A truly myriad-minded man, Tagore wrote poetry, novels, plays and essays; he composed music and was a painter as well. He introduced the genre of the short story to Bengal and shaped a new, modern language.

On a socio-political level, Tagore advocated education and rural development. However, the West was not interested in this multifaceted Tagore, but only in one aspect of his personality, the 'Wise Man from the Orient'. To many, and this emerges clearly when one reads Yeats or Hesse on Tagore, the Bengali writer was the personification of Eastern philosophy and mysticism – nothing more than that.

A look at Tagore's works first published in English tells us how this image formed: Tagore published 251 books in Bengali, of which 139 were prose works including 67 'books of essays'. Only 15% of these essay collections deal with religious themes. Between 1912 and 1966, 57 books by Tagore were translated into English, 37 of which in prose. Half of the prose books are 'books of essays.' Besides one book on Ghandi, all other books – mainly or in large parts – deal with religion or East-West questions. (Sen 1966, p.284-285) One need not wonder, then, that Tagore's image in the West was that of 'Wise Man from the Orient'. As Edward Said points out, Orientalism constructs an Orient that only partly corresponds to the real Orient – this is where problems arise. Tagore's aphorisms and *Gitanjali* fit the image of 'wise man'. Other writings, such as *Gora* or *The Home and the World*, do not. Admittedly, Tagore helped shape this image or, at least, did protest against this reductive image of the Sage.<sup>9</sup> But with Tagore's name clearly associated with mysticism and Oriental philosophy, his other works sunk into oblivion. Between Tagore's death and 1980, in the English-speaking West, his name was not associated with novels, theatre or short stories – aspects of his work he is most celebrated for in India.

The great changes in literary taste is another influential reason why Tagore nearly became a non-entity in the West. When Tagore first came to London, some post-Romantic conceptions about literature (and authors) were still acceptable – especially in the circles Tagore frequented. Invited by the *India Society* that had been founded in London in 1910, Tagore became friends with Yeats and Evelyn Underhill, an exponent of British mysticism. Tagore's most fervent admirer and sponsor in Germany was Count Hermann Keyserling who had founded the 'Schule der Weisheit', the School of Wisdom in Darmstadt. Very much of the 'hype' around Tagore was primarily about his person and *persona* (created in his lectures on universalism and world peace), secondarily about *Gitanjali* and essays, and only thirdly about his other writings. With literary criticism emphasizing the close reading of texts and raising it above generalizing discussion and speculation about either authorial intention or social context, someone like Tagore, who in England and in the United States was known mainly for his 'wisdom', did not raise a lot of interest in the English-speaking West. Most of his works sunk into oblivion. However, this is not true for other European countries, such as Germany and Spain.

### **The Controversial Practice of Translating a Translation**

The majority of first translations of the works by Tagore into other European languages relied on the English text rather than the Bengali original – a fact that is true not only for this novel but also for other works by Tagore. What is the effect of a translation twice removed from the original?

In 'The Invention of an Andalusian Tagore', Howard Young explores the reasons for 'Tagore's fortunes in the Spanish-speaking world [which] defy simple summarization.' (Young 1995, p.42) This has to do with Spanish Orientalism, very much *en vogue* at the time, but more importantly it has to do with the fact that Nobel Prize winner Juan Ramón Jiménez and his wife decided to translate Tagore into

Spanish. In the Spanish poet Jiménez, according to Young, ‘Tagore may have found one of his most sympathetic translators.’ (*ibid.*) Jiménez, however, did not speak English himself and thus had no direct access to the English version of the poems. His wife did, and so she would ‘prepare a straightforward Spanish version that rigidly followed Tagore’s word order and format’ (*ibid.*, p.46) in English. Then Jiménez would ‘enhance’ the poem. This process

... changes from interlingual, or translation proper, to intra-lingual, a rewording or working with signs in the same language. By paying particular attention to the rhythmic possibilities of Spanish prosody and exercising his own choices in diction, based on the conventions of European symbolism and on the writings of the Spanish Romantic poet Bécquer, Juan Ramón turned out the published version. (*ibid.*)

As a Westerner, one struggles to define Jiménez’s practice as translation, but it does fit the Indian definition of *transcreation* perfectly. Whether one agrees with this practice or not, the outcome of this transcreation was indeed very good. Jiménez’s translations were of such high quality that Tagore remained an important author in Spain, regularly published all through the twentieth century, at a time when he was nearly forgotten in the English-speaking countries in the West.

The German translation of *The Home and the World* by Helene Meyer- Franck for the publisher Kurt Wolff in 1920 is called *Das Heim und die Welt*. Beneath the title, Meyer-Franck felt compelled to write: ‘*Nach d. vom Autor selbst besorgten engl. Ausg. übers.*’ (translated from the English version of the novel that the author himself wrote). The English novel, however, only names Surendranath Tagore as the translator. Why would you deceive your readers? The translation of an ‘original’ text seems to be acceptable, while the translation of a translation is more problematic. The translator was clearly worried about the authenticity of the English text and felt that her readership would accept a translation once removed from the original rather than one twice removed. Even though the German reader was deceived, *Das Heim und die Welt* saw four editions between 1920 and 1984 – the last two in East Germany. Not as popular as in Spain, but not as forgotten as in the UK and the USA, in West Germany Tagore’s aphorisms, some poems and short stories were published on a more or less regular basis between 1920 until 1980. Tagore was more popular in East Germany where Gisela Leiste translated directly from Bengali. There is a new translation of *Gora* by her that dates back to 2004, but *The Home and the World* is currently out of print in Germany – while it seems to be more *en vogue* in the UK and the USA.

## Restoring Tagore

Tagore was an important figure, if not *the* most important, figure in Bengali Renaissance. His works have seen a second renaissance in the English-speaking West in the last twenty years. What are the reasons for this ongoing restoration of his literary importance?

A new generation of Anglo-Indian writers, which includes such authors as Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai, has helped shape a new literary image of the subcontinent. In 1978, Edward Said published the influential *Orientalism* and, in an attempt to redefine the East and itself, the West turned its interest towards forgotten names like Tagore’s again. Twenty years ago, Mary Lago demanded ‘more translations of previously translated works, more translations more faithful to the

Bengali originals and free of the awkwardness and crippling deletions that discourage the modern reader.’ (Lago 1989, p.21-22)

Indeed, Pratima Bowes and William Radice have (re)translated Tagore’s poems and songs into English. Sujit Mukherjee retranslated *Gora* in 1996 but, in Europe, *The Home and the World* is still published in its first translation. Publishers must agree with Radice that Tagore’s involvement in the translation gives it ‘an enhanced authenticity’ (Tagore 2005, p.viii). This might be the reason why the only other existing translation of *Ghare Baire*, by Nivedita Sen from the University of Delhi, published in 2004 by Shrishti Publishers, has not been mentioned in recent Tagore criticism which considers the 1919 text as main source. The silence surrounding Sen’s translation is astonishing; is this because critics and readers simply are not aware of the existence of this translation, or is there an unease about what Sen is doing, a feeling that she is doing something *wrong*? There still seem to exist two conflicting ideas of the literary text as an *autonomous entity* or an *author’s property* on one hand, and the text as *social product*, on the other. Because of Tagore’s involvement in the 1919 translation of the novel, this translation seems to be more authentic in the eyes of literary critics, reviewers and readers. Although Indian translation theory proclaims that each text has its own right of existence, by going back to the original Bengali text and attempting her own interpretation of the text, Sen seems to have touched upon a taboo.<sup>10</sup>

As far as critical attention to the novel is concerned, there have been interesting developments. Some Indian universities, such as Delhi University, changed their syllabus in the late 1990s, introducing a range of literary texts by Indian writers in translation, the 1919 translation of *The Home and the World* being one of them. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this has already led to the publication of two collections of critical essays in English on Tagore’s novel. Many of the contributors are grounded in ‘cultural bilingualism’ (Datta 2005, p.24) and thus able to compare *Ghare Baire* and *The Home and the World* directly, providing readers who do not speak Bengali with fascinating insights. In the West, Mary Lago, William Radice and Andrew Robinson have written about different aspects of Tagore’s work and thus helped to redefine him as an important figure in world literature. This restoration process is still ongoing – Tagore’s work is so multi-faceted and multi-layered that we can expect more translations of his work and a diversified and challenging critical response in the coming decades, both from Eastern and Western scholars.

### Bibliography:

ADRINGA, E., 2006. For God’s and Virginia’s Sake, why a translation? – Virginia Woolf’s Transfer to the Low Countries. *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3(3), pp.201-226

CHATTERJEE, K. K., 2001. *The Home and the World*. Tagore’s Ghandi Novel. In: Kundu, R. (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World. Critical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Asia Book Club, pp.109-116

CHATTERJEE, R., 1990. *The Golden Book of Tagore; A Homage to Rabindranath Tagore from India and the World in Celebration of his Seventieth Birthday*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Calcutta: The Golden Book of Tagore Committee

- CHATTOPADHYAY, J., 2005. *Ghare Baire* and its Readings. In: *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World. A Critical Companion*, pp.187-204
- DIMOCK, E. C., 1959. Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest Baul of Bengal: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, XIX, (1), pp.33-51
- DATTA, P. K. (ed.), 2005. *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World. A Critical Companion*. London: Anthem South Asian Studies
- DUTTA, K. & ROBINSON, A. (eds.), 1995, *Rabindranath Tagore. The Myriad-Minded Man*. London: Bloomsbury
- FORSTER, E. M., 1983. *Abinger Harvest*. Vol. 14. London: Edward Arnold
- HJÄRNE, H., 1913. Presentation Speech (chairman of the Nobel Committee) [accessed on 25 November 2008]  
[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/press.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/press.html)
- HURWITZ, H. M., 1964. Yeats and Tagore: *Comparative Literature*, 16 (1), pp.55-64
- KUNDU, R. (ed.), 2001. *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World. Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Asia Book Club
- LAGO, M. & WARWICK, R. (eds.), 1989. *Rabindranath Tagore. Perspectives in Time*. London: Macmillan
- LUKÁCS, G., 1983. *Reviews and articles from Die rote Fahne*. Trans. Peter Palmer. London: Merlin Press
- MUKHERJEE, M., 2004. Tagore in the new millennium. *The Hindu Online* [Internet] 6 June [accessed on 25 November 2008]  
<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/lr/2004/06/06/stories/2004060600160300.htm>
- POUND, E., 1913. Rabindranath Tagore: *Fortnightly Review XCIII*, 99, pp.571-579
- RABINOWITZ, P. L., 1997. *Before Reading. Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. Columbus: Ohio State Press University
- RAO, R., 2006. Language and Spirit. In: Ashcroft, B., Griffins, G. & Tiffin, H. (eds.) *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. London & New York: Routledge
- ROTHENSTEIN, W., 1940. *Since fifty*. New York: Macmillan
- SALES SALVADOR, D., 2005. Translational Passages. Indian Fiction in English as Transcreation? In: Branchadell, A. & West, L. M. (eds.). *Less Translated Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp.189-206
- SEN, N., 1966. The "Foreign Incarnation" of Rabindranath Tagore. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 25 (2), pp.276-286
- TAGORE, R., 2004. *The Home and the World*. Trans. Nivedita Sen. New Delhi: Shrishti Publishers
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2005. *The Home and the World*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Trans. Surendranath Tagore. London: Penguin Classics
- THOMPSON, E., 1991. *Rabindranath Tagore. Poet and Dramatist*. Delhi: Oxford University Press
- YOUNG, H., 1995. The Invention of an Andalusian Tagore. *Comparative Literature*, 47(1), pp.42-52.

## Notes:

- 1 *Purdah* or *pardaa*, from Urdu and Persian for ‘veil’ or ‘curtain’, is the practice in certain Muslim and Hindu societies to separate women from men, by giving them separate rooms or by dressing them in all-enveloping clothes.
- 2 The Swadeshi movement was a boycott of foreign-made goods organized by Indian nationalists in response to the partition of Bengal in 1905. Protesters burnt imported cloth and vowed to use only domestic (*swadeshi*) cloth and manufactured goods instead. This movement stimulated both Indian industry and nationalist protest.
- 3 For a more detailed account of reactions to the novel in Bengal between 1915 and 1994, see Jayanti Chattopadhyay “*Ghare Baire* and its Readings” in Datta, 2005, pp.187-204.
- 4 ‘Shakespeare has created many heroines, but nobody bothers to find out how far they represent the ideal English woman. Even the Christian clergy would not bother to grade them according to their Christian behaviour.’ Quoted in Kundu, p.97.
- 5 Harish Trivedi comments on the issue: “The trouble with Tagore’s own translations, as with those done by his Santiniketan associates under his own close supervision and revision, is that they diminish and emasculate the variety and vitality which constitute his unequalled greatness in Bengali. Tagore systematically left out much that was local, specific and original in his work for fear that it would prove unfamiliar and ‘difficult’ to an English reader. (quoted in Thompson, 1996, p.11).
- 6 See Harold M. Hurwitz, ‘Yeats and Tagore’ in *Comparative Literature*, 16 (1), 1964, p.62.
- 7 See Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore. The Myriad-Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p.193.
- 8 For a more detailed analysis of Lukács’ criticism of Tagore, see Kalyan Kumar Chatterjee ‘The Home and the World, Tagore’s Ghandi Novel’ in Kundu, pp.109-117.
- 9 When Harald Hjärne, Chairman of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy held the inauguration speech in 1913, he defined Tagore as ‘a bearer of good tidings from that treasure house of the East whose existence had long been conjectured’, blessed with ‘the gift of prophecy’ who places before the Westerner the culture that in ‘the vast, peaceful, and enshrining forests of India attains its perfection, a culture that seeks primarily the quiet peace of the soul in ever-increasing harmony with the life of nature herself. It is a poetical, not a historical, picture that Tagore here reveals to us to confirm his promise that a peace awaits us, too.’
- 10 In June 2004, six months after Sen’s new English translation of *Ghare Baire*, Meenakshi Mukherjee published an article in *The Hindu* discussing the fact that three English translations of Tagore’s novel *Chokher Bali* had been commissioned and published within several months from each other: one by Penguin, one by Shrishti and one by Rupa & Co. Mukherjee clearly states that there was no need for what he defines a ‘sudden and excessive interest’ in this particular novel and attributes the appearance of the three translations to the extra-literary domain in which there is ‘a virtual scramble among English publishers in India to cash in on the brand name Tagore.’ Mukherjee touches on interesting issues regarding Tagore’s standing in Indian culture. While he mentions the translations of other novels by Tagore in the article, he does not even acknowledge the existence of Sen’s new translation of *Ghare Baire*. The reasons for this are definitely worth investigating further, as are the differences between the 1919 and the 2004 translations.

## A New Compound: Dante's Guido in Prufrock's Hell

PATRICK HOWARD

*Trinity College Dublin*

When I first came into contact with Dante and the personage of Guido da Montefeltro, it was in the context of trying to come to terms with Italian language and literature, and the towering figure of Dante Alighieri and his *Commedia* and other minor works. One of the particular difficulties encountered by students in studying the *Commedia*, was the fact that so many commentators differed as regards the precise significance and role of many of the characters encountered in that great work. One could question the true meaning and import of Dante's messages, but one did not get clear answers in all cases.

The world of Comparative Literature itself broadened the study of a particular language and literature in an exponential way, in the sense that one looked for influences outward from the language itself. It represented an entirely new vista, and very quickly, it became apparent that there were Dantean allusions evident in the works of authors as far apart as Eliot, Solzhenitsyn, Akhmatova and Mandelstam. Before moving to that point, however, there was the question of interpretation of what the subject entailed. Much theoretical debate has surrounded the topic of comparative literature over a period of two hundred years, but I will have regard to what Susan Bassnett said about it in her 2006 essay<sup>1</sup> in addressing the linkages, if any, between Dante's Guido and Eliot's Prufrock. Her view was that comparative literature had lost its way because of the prescriptiveness of some of its theories, that comparison should take place during the reading process itself, and that one should focus in particular on the interconnectedness of literary transfer. My approach will be to look at the thematic allusions and to leave over the question of style for another occasion. It is not easy to be precise about the influence of the great man on other writers and other poets, when one is not even certain about his own precise message, but therein lies the challenge.

This paper will attempt to establish to what extent the following epigram taken from Dante's *Inferno* is relevant to T. S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (Eliot 1954, p.3) – commonly known as *Prufrock*<sup>2</sup>:

S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse  
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.  
Ma però che già mai di questo fondo  
non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo. (Sapegno ed., p.313-314)

[If I thought my reply were  
to a person who would ever return to the world  
this flame should remain without further shaking  
But since none ever returned alive from this depth,

if I hear the truth  
without fear of infamy I answer you. (trans. Durling, p.419)]

Why did Eliot, a devoted admirer of Dante, choose these words as an epigraph to *Prufrock*? Mattheison says that 'an epigraph may illuminate a whole poem, and is itself designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem' (1935, p.52). Was this true in Eliot's case? Furthermore, were those words used by the speaker (or the character of the speaker) Guido da Montefeltro, or indeed by the other person of significance in that canto, Pope Boniface VIII. Did they relate to the events described in the remainder of that particular canto or to the whole of the *Inferno*? What possible connection could there be between the characters of Dante's Guido and T. S. Eliot's Prufrock? Who were these characters? How could one of the towering European authors of the medieval age influence a poet and writer born six hundred years later in the New World? In what way did Eliot become familiar with Dante or his writings? This is what I aim to determine.

I have already said that I have accepted Bassnett's interpretation of comparative literature. It is a matter of record that Eliot believed in interconnectedness, the debt of poets to poets of other languages and the nourishment of poetry by foreign tongues. It is notable that he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature on 10th December 1948 as a recognition of the supranational value of poetry. His words were:

To enjoy poetry belonging to another language, is to enjoy an understanding of the people to whom that language belongs, an understanding we can get in no other way. We may think also of the history of poetry in Europe, and of the great influence that the poetry of one language can exert on another: we must remember the immense debt of every considerable poet to poets of other languages than his own: we may reflect that the poetry of every country and every language would decline and perish, were it not nourished by poetry in foreign tongues.

These quotations were not surprising as Eliot had long been a champion of the idea of influence, as the following three quotations, taken from Eliot's 1922 essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, illustrate:

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors: we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.

The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together .

It will be apparent from these quotations where the title of my paper came from.

Prufrock is the name of the character used by T. S. Eliot in a poem written in 1910/11 and published in 1917. The title, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, was not the original title envisaged by Eliot, as becomes clear from the notebook maintained by Eliot in those years (Ricks 1996, p.39). Neither was this epigraph the original choice. As regards the title itself, Stephen Stepanchev said that Prufrock was the name of a furniture store in St. Louis at the time of composition of the poem; a name so rare, that a search of the telephone directories of fifteen large cities in the US in 1950, contained no entries whatever except for three in St. Louis (Stepanchev, 1951).

If one were to read *Prufrock* without adverting to the epigram, it is probable that one would interpret it as a monologue written in blank verse, about the thoughts of a man who lives in a drab and polluted urban environment, who is self-deprecating and who seems incapable of taking any form of decisive action in relation to approaching a woman whom he desires. His intention is clear: 'Let us go and make our visit.' (Eliot 1954, p.3-7, line 12). However, he is incapable of taking the action necessary to fulfil his intention. The poem skips from descriptions of the neighbourhood ('half-deserted streets', line 4), to the weather ('yellow fog', line 15) and to his vision of what will take place when he meets his beloved ('before the taking of toast and tea', line 34). Yet he keeps deferring his decision on the basis that there is time, not only to make the decision later, but to make a hundred indecisions meantime. The phrase 'there will be time' is repeated on five occasions, but the most significant words of doubt are: 'Do I dare, do I dare, time to turn back and descend the stair' (lines 38/39).

Prufrock comes to the conclusion that his visit would not have been worthwhile, and resorts to contrasting himself with Hamlet and describing himself as a fool. His self-deprecation reaches a low point when he says: 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws, scuttling along the floors of silent seas' (lines 73/74). He eventually resigns himself to the approach of old age ('I grow old, I grow old', line 120) and death ('and we drown', line 131).

One might perhaps detect some of the allusions to Dante present in the poem, but, without the epigram, they would not really be evident. The most obvious, 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' (lines 94/95) could be interpreted as the description of Dante's journey through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, and his encounters with personages, some of whom, for example Piero da Medicina (Canto XXVIII, lines 73-81) ask him to bring news back to the living. Less obvious are: 'I am no prophet, and here's no great matter; I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker' (lines 83/84) and 'I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be' (line 111). Both could be interpreted as reflecting the type of indecision which Dante displayed in Canto II, lines 31-33, of *Inferno* when he feared to undertake the journey:

Io non Enea, io non Paolo sono  
Me degno a ciò né io né altri crede. (Sapegno ed., p.21)

[I am not Aeneas,  
I am not Paul: neither I  
Nor others believe me worthy of that. (trans. Durling, p.420)]

To say that Guido da Montefeltro is a quite different character altogether to Prufrock is a masterpiece of understatement. A Ghibelline warlord, a mercenary, he was certainly a man of action. The words associated with him by Dante and by many commentators are 'astute, suspicious, deceit, cunning, untrustworthy'. Guido prides

himself on being a fox in military affairs, rather than a lion, one who knew all the wiles and was proud of it:

L'opera mie  
Non furon leonine, ma di volpe  
Li accorgimenti e le coperte vie  
Io seppi tutte e si menai lor arte  
Ch'al fine de la terra il suono uscie (Sapegno ed., p.315)

[My works  
Were not those of a lion but a fox  
The tricks and the hidden ways I knew them all  
And I so plied their art  
That the fame of it went to the ends of the earth. (trans. Durling, p.421)]

So when a man of action, this devious, cunning man decided, in 1296, that the time had come to 'lower the sails and coil the ropes' (*ibid.*), he entered the convent of St. Francis to make reparation, by prayer, for past sins. In the *Convivio*, Dante had argued that, in the fourth and last stage of life, as death approached, the mind should devote itself entirely to the contemplation of God 'Rendesi dunque a Dio la nobile anima in questa etade, e attende lo fine di questa vita con molto desiderio (*Convivio*, p.330) [The noble soul, then, surrenders itself to God in this age of life with great desire (trans. Lansing, p.233)]'. He cited Guido as such an example:

... lo nobilissimo nostro latino Guido montefeltrano. Bene questi nobili calaro le vele de le mundane operazioni, che ne la loro lunga etade a religione si rendero, ogni mondano diletto e opera disponendo. (*Convivio*, 330)

[... the most noble of the Italians, Guido of Montefeltro. These noble men did indeed lower the sails of their wordly preoccupations and late in life gave themselves to religious orders, forsaking all wordly delights and affairs. (trans. Lansing, p.233)]

It should be pointed out that Dante wrote the *Convivio* some years before the *Commedia* and commentators have speculated on whether the events described in canto XXVII were true or a product of Dante's own invention. His reparation was short-lived as Pope Boniface VIII, Dante's inveterate enemy, tempted Guido back into his former ways by asking Guido for advice on how to raze the city of Palestrina to the ground. Dante had described him as:

Lo principe de novi Farisei  
Avendo guerra presso a Laterano  
E non con Saracin ne con Giudei. (Sapegno ed., p.310)

[The Prince of the new Pharisees,  
Making war near the Lateran,  
And not against Saracens or Jews. (trans. Durling, p.421)]

This is clearly an indication of his contempt for a Pope who was making war against the family of two cardinals in the Curia, rather than fighting the Infidels in the Holy Land.

The wily Guido succeeded in obtaining advance absolution for his fraudulent advice, 'a long promise with a short keeping' (trans. Durling, p.423), but this form of assurance was ineffective when he was claimed by the black cherubim, who argued logically that he could not be absolved for his sins because he did not repent of them. Neither could one repent and will to do something at the same time.

There has been much debate among Dante scholars as to whether the protagonist of Canto XXVII is Guido or Boniface. There is, however, fairly general agreement among Dantean commentators about the meaning of the particular six lines contained in the epigraph. For example, Leonardi (1991, p.812-813) says that Guido fears only the infamy that would come from the revelation on earth of his final damnation arising from events unknown to the world, but he does not regret his sins. Giuseppe Giacalone (1974, p.407-408) feels that Guido's words reflect a cautious and suspicious soul who does not know how to resist the fascination of his own astuteness and his own fraudulent logic. Sapegno (1957, p.313-317) felt that Guido's conversion was ineffective because it did not radically transform the nature of the old man of arms, and was undertaken in his usual spirit of calculation. Landino, a fifteenth-century commentator, feels that Dante included the epigraph to demonstrate that greed of fame was in every man (2001, p.915).

Landino, Sapegno, Giacalone and Leonardi all believe that the protagonist is clearly Guido, but this belief is not held by everyone. Some critics have suggested that Guido's conversion was the work of a fox and that Guido's personality was that of a fox before Boniface ever tempted him. I would put forward the view that Boniface is associated primarily with Canto XIX and that he is explicitly condemned to Hell in this canto when one of his predecessors Nicholas says:

Se tu gia costi ritto  
Se tu gia costi ritto Bonifazio  
Di parecchi anni mi menti lo scritto. (Sapegno ed, p.222)

[Are you already standing there  
Are you already standing there Boniface  
The writing lied to me by several years. (trans. Durling, p.291)]

It would seem that Eliot himself was thinking more of Guido. We see here that Guido is deceived by Dante, by not revealing that he is living flesh and blood, and will thus be able to bring the true story of Guido's final act of deception back to the world. Boniface deceives Guido by making a promise of absolution to him, which he knows has no validity. Guido implicitly deceives the Franciscan order by sinning against his vows, albeit with assurances from no other than Christ's vicar on earth. Could Prufrock be deceiving everybody by not revealing his innermost secret? What indeed is his innermost secret?

Much of the attention of critics of Prufrock focussed on the identity of the person Prufrock was addressing. One of the most detailed reviews at the time of publication of the poem in 1917 was by May Sinclair who viewed the subject-matter as 'reality, stripped of all rhetoric': 'do I dare' (1982, p.86-88). Piers Gray saw Prufrock as an 'Isolated, confused, double-self - a hellish condition. Prufrock is in Hell' (1982, p.73). Jane Worthington (1949) has expressed the view that Prufrock fears the comments of the dead, who include the women who come and go. She adds that by placing Guido's fear of infamy among the living, against Prufrock's fear of a snicker from amongst the dead, Eliot has underscored the irony of the poem. Nancy Gish (1981) says that Prufrock has time for everything except willed choice, and that

the intensity of the final lines is due to him remembering still, the call of something strange and lovely which spoke to a part of him too long submerged beneath a dried and solidified self. It seems the meaning of *Prufrock* is best expressed by Ezra Pound who, in 1914, said: 'It is a portrait of failure, or of a character who fails [...] a portrait satire on futility [...] it can't end by turning that quintessence of futility, Mr. P, into a reformed character breathing out fire and ozone' (Eliot V, p.44).

As to the possible linkages between the characters of *Prufrock* and Guido, W. S. Merwin offered the view that there were three Dantes at work, Dante the character, Dante the narrator and Dante who was the representative of everyman. He went on to pose the question: 'Is *Prufrock* the everyman of the twentieth century?' He described *Prufrock* as being inhibited, self-conscious, but added the significant words: 'and, at that stage of life, so too is Eliot' (in Hawkins and Jacoff, 2001, p.292-293). Could the poem really be autobiographical? Being inhibited and self-conscious, however, are traits hardly worth the seal of infamy.

In view of this wealth of criticism, which represents only a fraction of what has been written about *Prufrock*, about Guido, and about their association, it is no easy task to put forward an interpretation about Eliot's motives in attaching Dante's epigraph to the poem. Are these the thoughts of an insecure man who feels that the passage of time will rob him of the ability to experience things he just about glimpses but cannot dare aspire to – a man who observes life but seems unable to participate in it? Does the poem *Prufrock* depict an emotional Hell? Is the character of *Prufrock* in fact Eliot at that stage of life? Did the original epigram reflect his thoughts more accurately at the time he wrote the poem? Was the epigraph changed to underline the fact that his own fear of infamy about his own inadequacies was great? I think we may find one possible answer to all these questions in the letter of Eliot to his friend Conrad Aitken on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1914 (Ricks 1996, p.179) when he wrote:

How much more self-conscious one is in a big city [...]. I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a big city [...]. One walks the streets with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off [...] if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago: and indeed I still think sometimes that it would be well to do so before marriage.

These inadequacies may have been at the root of the indecisive figure portrayed by *Prufrock*, and the epigraph may reflect the same desire as Guido's not to reveal his secret. It is notable that, when Eliot originally composed his poem, the title was '*Prufrock among the women*' and the notebook contained quite a different epigraph which said:

Sovenha vos a temps da mo dolor  
Poi s'ascose nel foco che li affina. (Sapegno ed., p.696)

Remember my suffering at the appropriate time  
Then he hid himself in the fire that refines him. (trans. Durling, p. 445)

This epigraph seems to be more in keeping with the views and feelings expressed in the letter to Conrad Aitken. We can only speculate on why Eliot changed this in 1917 to the version we have been addressing, but in the meantime Eliot had married – although the marriage did not prove to be happy. It is unlikely that Eliot was thinking of Guido when he wrote the poem at first. The epigraph refers to 'my suffering'. It

seems possible that in the final version he altered this to place more emphasis on the fear of discovery of his own problem – but that is one view.

### Bibliography:

BASSNETT, S., 2006. Reflections on Comparative Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Comparative Critical Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 3-11

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *La Divina Commedia* (Ed. Natalino Sapegno 1957), Milan: Riccardi.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1993. *Convivio*. Milano: BUR Classico

DURLING, R., 2001. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Vol. 1: Inferno*. New York: Oxford University Press

ELIOT, T. S., 1954. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber

\_\_\_\_\_, 1922. *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism. Tradition and the Individual Talent*. <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html> [Accessed 09/11/2009]

\_\_\_\_\_, 1948, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1948/eliot-speech.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1948/eliot-speech.html) [Accessed 09/11/2009]

ELIOT, V. (ed.), 1958. *Letters 1898-1922 of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber

GIACALONE, G., 1974. *Dante Alighieri. La Divina Commedia. Inferno*. Roma: Angelo Signorelli

GISH, N., 1981. *Time in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot: A Study in Structure and Theme*. London: Macmillan

GRANT, M. (ed.), 1982. *T. S. Eliot Volume 1: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge

GRAY, P., 1982. *T. S. Eliot: Intellectual and Poetic Development 1909-1922*. Brighton: Harvester

HAWKINS, P.S., & JACOFF, R., (Eds) 2001. *The Poets Dante*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

LANDINO, C., 2001. *Comento Sopra la Comedia: Tomo II*. Rome: Salerno

LANSING, R. H., 1990. *Dante's Il Convivio (The Banquet)*. New York, Garland Publishing

LEONARDI, A. M., 1991. *Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia. Inferno*. Milan: Mondadori

MATTHEISON, F.O., 1935. *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. New York: Oxford University Press

RICKS, C., 1996. *Inventions of a March Hare: Poems 1909-1917 by T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber

SINCLAIR, M., 1982. 'Prufrock and Other Observations: A Criticism. from *Little Review* December 1917', Vol. iv 8-14. In: Grant, M. (ed.) *T. S. Eliot Volume I: The Critical Heritage*, pp.86-88

STEPANCHEV, S., 1951. *The Origin of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, Modern Language Notes

WORTHINGTON, J., 1949. The Epigraphs to the Poetry of T. S. Eliot. *American Literature*, Vol. 21, No.1, pp.1-17.

### Notes:

- 1 Bassnett, Project Muse, DOI: 10.1353/ccs.2006.0002 [Accessed 09/11/2009]. pp.1-2.
- 2 In the remainder of this paper, I will use the word '*Prufrock*' to refer to '*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*'.

The Aesthetics of Dislocation: Liminality in José María Merino's 'Las palabras del mundo' ('The Words of the World', 1990) and Juan José Millás' 'La casa vacía' ('The Empty House', 1994)

PATRICIA GARCIA

*Dublin City University / Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona*

'I am conscious of the world as consisting of multiple realities.  
As I move from one reality to another, I experience the transition as a kind of shock.'  
(Berger & Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*)

The second half of the twentieth century provided a few turning points which changed the way individuals experienced space, in particular the space which one identifies as 'safe'. Since the mid-1940s, several historical events and scientific discoveries – the end of World War II, the collapse of the USSR, the fall of the Iron Curtain, the enlargement of the European Union, the expansion of new technologies and the creation of virtual space, to name but a few – have transformed the contemporary notions of 'homeland' and 'border', both essential ideas to distinguish the 'familiar' from the 'unfamiliar'. They have raised major questions concerning the definition, expression and, in the most extreme cases, the utility of frontiers.

The traditional concept of 'limit', now in constant transformation, becomes a fascinating ground of research for many disciplines (e.g. sociology, anthropology and politics) which investigate how the individual experiences the lack of a permanent centre or fixed spatial references. The notion of 'familiar space' – and 'the border' that separates it from what is unsafe and unknown – plays a crucial role in the fantastic genre, as summarised by the writer and theorist Rosemary Jackson: 'the fantastic text is essentially preoccupied with limits' (1981, p.48).

This paper will analyse how and where the domain of the real and that of the supernatural meet. In particular, I will focus on the discourse of liminality and its various representations. There are four parts: the first part presents some of the most significant theories of the genre – Todorov's work, later developed by other critics such as Jackson or Chanady, which throw some light on the importance of the 'liminal' in the fantastic text – the second part explains the main characteristics of liminality and its symbolism, and gives some examples of liminal images in the fantastic genre; the third and fourth parts examine the fiction of two contemporary and prominent Spanish writers, José María Merino and Juan José Millás, whose work demonstrates the resurrection of the fantastic short-story in Spain. Their texts have been selected in order to provide two different views on the 'limit', both a dividing line between safe and unsafe and also an essential notion to express and define anything. The analysis will concentrate on Merino's 'Las palabras del mundo' ('The

Words of the World', 1990) and Millás' 'La casa vacía' ('The Empty House', 1994). In the first story, the interplay between domestic and fantastic space is foregrounded. The threshold becomes the main symbol of disruption of shelter. The second story is constructed upon the dissolution of definition; the limitation and effectiveness of words is at its core.

### **Towards a definition of the space of fantastic encounter**

The word 'fantastic' stems from the Latin word *phantasticus*, an adjective meaning 'imaginary' or 'visionary'. In this sense, it could be said that any activity which implies imagination is fantastic. In dictionaries, together with 'extraordinary' or 'of excellent quality', and 'strange' or 'bizarre', this word is defined against 'the real', belonging to the realm of fantasy. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines it as 'imaginary, not reasonable' and similarly in the *Oxford English Dictionary* it appears as 'imaginative; remote from reality'.

This is the starting point of a debate on the definition of fantastic narrative. Critical opinion can be divided into two main trends. The first understands 'the fantastic' as any non-mimetic literary category, including fantasy, the marvellous and science-fiction. Kathryn Hume, for example, believes that the fantastic is 'any departure from consensus reality' (1984, p.21). Lucie Armitt, Neil Cornwell or Edward Rabkin similarly note that: 'The wide range of works which we call [...] fantastic is large, much too large to constitute a single genre. [It includes] whole conventional genres, such as fairy tale, detective story...' (Rabkin, 1977, p.118) This general meaning given to the term 'fantastic' possibly originates from the predominance of the idea of 'mimesis' in Western civilisation, as opposed to everything else, which is considered 'non-mimetic'. Dolezel, in his essay on 'Mimesis and Possible Worlds' points out:

From its origins, i.e. the writings of Plato and Aristotle, Occidental aesthetic thinking has been dominated by the idea of mimesis. Fictions (fictional objects) are derived from reality, they are imitations/representations of actually existing entities. (1988, p.1)

The second main trend is represented by scholars such as Tzvetan Todorov, Irène Bessière, Rosemary Jackson and David Roas, among many others. They agree on the fact that fantastic literature needs a more specific definition to distinguish it from other non-mimetic genres. Among them, there is a consensus that the fantastic text, set in a world that the reader recognises as his, is characterised by a conflictive opposition between the natural and the supernatural. The existence of the supernatural is never resolved or rationalised (for example as it being only a dream) in the text. The interplay of spaces (real-impossible, safe-unsafe) is, in fact, what distinguishes the fantastic from other neighbouring genres such as fantasy or the marvellous.

Tzvetan Todorov's canonical study *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970) seeks to elaborate a formal characterisation of the fantastic. He takes up some ideas previously put forward by scholars such as Louis Vax, Roger Caillois or Pierre-Georges Castex, who had already suggested in their works that the text needs to establish two orders, the natural and the supernatural.<sup>1</sup> This juxtaposition of spaces or realities also constitutes the point of departure of Todorov's study. He develops a theory which takes *hésitation* as the key aspect that defines the fantastic

genre. The fantastic is a moment of hesitation between the natural (or real) and the supernatural (or impossible):

The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by forces unknown to us. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. (Todorov, 1970, p.25)

According to him, the fantastic text is therefore ‘suspended’ between the two extremes, the uncanny and the marvellous, and can only be defined in opposition to these two poles. The first occurs when the supernatural experience is rationalised as an illusion of the senses or a dream, for example. The second is an experience accepted as supernatural.

Todorov’s work is still considered one of the most influential theories of the fantastic genre and praised for providing the genre with an academic frame. However, his successors improved upon his theory, identifying some aspects that should be refined. One of the main reproaches has been that his premise of hesitation is too restrictive. Although it can be applicable to some works, such as Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) in which the reader never discovers the nature of the governess’ visions, there are further canonical fantastic texts that Todorov’s definition would exclude.<sup>2</sup>

Rosemary Jackson’s theories present a more developed model than Todorov’s theory on the fantastic, in that she acknowledges the importance of the socio-historical context. She establishes that the fantastic text is set on our reality, or in what we agree to be the norm, and therefore the study of the space in which the text is set is essential to understand how the fantastic works. Jackson places a great importance in the discourse of the limit (of the visible, of the explicable and graspable) that separates the real from the supernatural. This border is the place where these two realms interact: ‘[The fantastic is to be] conceptualised only by negative terms according to categories of realism: im-possible, un-real, name-less, form-less, un-known, in-visible.’ (1981, p.21)

It is true that the fantastic genre shares much common ground with other non-mimetic genres. What distinguishes the fantastic from other neighbouring genres is how the realm of the real and that of the impossible interact. These two separate and opposed spaces, reality and the impossible, are distinguished in the text to later make them collide. The text must rely on the assumption of a ‘real’ world, which is what we understand as ‘reality’, codified by our laws of reason and by social conventions. Several literary devices are thus employed to convey an impression of veracity or authenticity. The supernatural event is then inexplicable according to our logical rules and, also, it is not be rationalised in the text; it remains unresolved and ‘impossible’, therefore highly dislocating<sup>3</sup>. Modern approaches to the genre highlight this fact:

For a text to be considered ‘fantastic’, a space similar to the one that the reader inhabits has to be created; this space will be attacked by an impossible event or creature that will alter its stability [...] Contrary to fantastic literature, in fantasy or marvellous texts the supernatural is shown as natural, in a very different space that the reader inhabits. (Roas 2001, p.8-10)<sup>4</sup>

The genre needs liminal spaces to operate: spaces between the possible and the impossible can occur. This place is often represented by a symbol referring to a border, line, threshold, or one of many other liminal images.

### **Fantastic liminal images**

Liminality stems from the word *limen*, which is the Latin word for threshold. It defines any entrance or border or beginning. The studies on liminality and liminal identities play a very important role in other disciplines such as psychology or anthropology. They use this term to designate a state of being between two different existential planes. Some of the scholars who dealt with this theme in depth are Arnold Van Gennep (*Les Rites de passage*, 1909) and his successor Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process*, 1969). They analysed 'initiation' or 'passage rituals' in some societies (for example the transition from childhood into adult life). One of their conclusions was that the journey from one stage into the other, or into the unknown, implies a later reformulation of the individual and, as a result, has deeply dislocating effects:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner, 1969, p.95)

These shed light upon the main characteristics of liminality. The liminal state means being at an intermediate state, phase or condition. It is characterized by ambiguity and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity is held in a moment of suspension, bringing about disorientation, which results in a period of transition where normal limits to thought and self-understanding fail.

As an example, our daily life is impregnated with liminal images: in time, the twilight is a liminal moment, and one which is also a favourite setting in fantastic literature. Liminal identities would be personified by refugees or transgender people. Liminal spaces, characterised by their transitional nature and their lack of history and roots, may be disputed territories and borders, such as the Berlin Wall. In mythology, a classic liminal space is the Gate of Hades.

Among the most common fantastic liminal symbols we find the threshold of a house, for example, a Gothic castle (Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, 1897), a hole (like the rabbit hole that leads Alice into the fantastic realm in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, 1865), a door (H. G. Wells' *The Door in the Wall*, 1911) or a window (as in Lord Dunsany's *The Wonderful Window*, 1916). Also, a classic motif of the genre is the use of a liminal space where the dead and the living meet, such as cemeteries, caves, corridors and masked balls.

At a textual level, the discourse of the limit and its symbolic representation is a structural element that delimits the fantastic domain from the real in the text. It serves to separate dichotomies such as safe-unsafe, order-disorder, known-unknown, codified- non-codified, and is designed to produce the contact of two opposed realms (i.e. natural-supernatural). The liminal space is, therefore, a zone of conflict and dislocation, where no valid laws rule: a no-man's land. Limits mark the beginning of a realm where our laws and logic play no role.

Finally, liminal images are a powerful symbol of transition, and especially of transgression into the uncertain. Crossing that limit symbolises going through or across what should be impenetrable. They are essential in the fantastic text because they introduce the possibility of entering (into) an unknown, unsafe and impossible domain. Some of the traditional effects of the threshold can be found throughout the classic fantastic production of authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, H. P. Lovecraft, H. G. Wells or Théophile Gautier. They are used to alter ordinary time-space coordinates: for example, once crossed the character enters (into) the past or the future; to enable the character to see what cannot be seen by others, for example through a door, and to access an impossible space and become part of it, for example in a painting.

### **From haunted houses to haunted homes: the dissolution of shelter in Juan José Millás' 'La casa vacía' ('The Empty House', 1994)**

As mentioned previously, one of the preferred liminal symbols in the genre is the threshold of the house. It represents the entrance of a safe space, ideal for the sudden irruption of the unknown. Among the most popular ones, there are Edgar Allan Poe's and Henry James's mansions in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) respectively.

Gaston Bachelard is one of the prominent philosophers who have provided a valuable theoretical basis for analysing the experience of domestic space in contemporary culture<sup>5</sup>. In his influential work, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), he examines the reciprocal relationship between man and space: human habitation has an impact on geometrical form and form transforms its inhabitants:

Thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed and, if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. (p.8)

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability (p.17).

As these quotes portray, domestic space implies the notions of 'safety', 'shelter' and 'stability'. It is where the individual feels most safest and, therefore, can easily be caught off guard in the fantastic text. Julio Cortázar, an Argentinian author well-known for revolutionising the modern fantastic short-story, presents a very interesting perspective on this in his story 'Casa tomada' ('House Taken Over', 1956)<sup>6</sup>. It narrates of how a mysterious force progressively takes possession of every domestic space of the house, starting with the kitchen. Every new step of the force results in the characters' further exclusion, as they lock themselves out of another room until the force has taken over the whole house and they have to leave their family home. This text already shows ground-breaking elements that will later be developed in contemporary stories. The nature of the fantastic element, for one, is not disclosed. Instead, the focus is on how the characters experience the reduction of space.

In 'La casa vacía' ('The Empty House', 1994), Millás employs the traditional motif of the house and its threshold. The emphasis, as in Cortázar's, is not so much placed on the threat of going to an unknown space, for instance a haunted house, but rather on the destabilising effect of feeling foreign at home: a very common post-modern theme. In the short story, a widower, whose children have moved out, abandons his old house to move into a new apartment. Bored of his daily life, he

creates a character that he obsessively observes. It is an image of a woman that he projects on the empty flat opposite his apartment.

The interplay of spaces is important in the story. All of them emphasise the oppositions 'empty' and 'full', 'house' and 'home'. Firstly, the family house is no longer 'home'. The departure of its inhabitants implies a disruption of the family unity. The character, whose name is not disclosed, feels overwhelmed by this empty space left after the departure of his family. He senses that the house 'became an excessive desert for the movements of a lonely man' (Millás in Roas & Casas, eds. 2008, p.285). He feels the urge to leave this vacuum and move to a smaller flat. This already shows his search for shelter or what the narrator calls 'a flat with manageable dimensions' (*ibid.*). The other place is the empty flat opposite to his, which he observes from his balcony. He baptises it 'The Uninhabited'<sup>7</sup>. This is the space that takes up most of the description in the narrative and is the one that occupies the character's mind. He fills up this space, creating a figure that will inhabit it.

One of the main liminal symbols of the story is the balcony, a place from which he observes the daily routine of his neighbours and the people on the streets. This is described by him as boring, like 'contemplating the mechanism of a clock, so monotonous and predictable' (*ibid.*). However, this space is also the aperture into the unknown, the threshold into 'The Uninhabited'. Sitting on that balcony he observes, created from his own imagination, a young woman in underwear performing her daily tasks: 'She took the broom/brush and started sweeping. She moved so naturally' (*ibid.*, p.286). This aperture into the fantastic realm created by him is 'exciting' and 'mysterious' (*ibid.*). The separation between his balcony and that of his fantastic character becomes a transitional space where the codes of the two domains flow: the real world, symbolically contained in his apartment, and a world of fiction. As long as the balcony clearly separates them, there is no fantastic invasion.

The first incident takes place when 'The Uninhabited' starts showing unexpected changes. However, it is not the imaginary woman who has gained human form to invade reality, but it is reality that intrudes upon the fantasy world of the protagonist. The intruder of 'The Uninhabited' is a man in his fifties 'in underwear and suspenders' (*ibid.*, p.287), who has bought the empty apartment. This invasion of the character's imaginary space provokes a collision of the two domains and results in his destabilisation. The fact that he goes and kills the man in order to 'purify reality' (*ibid.*), as he states, already shows that the distinction between what is real and what belongs to his own imagination is now blurred.

Afterwards, the two homes seem to be re-established. However, his anxiety over the imaginary woman causes him one day to leave the balcony, cross the threshold and try to find her. He then becomes the intruder of that fantastic realm he had created. There is no way out of this situation: from the other side of the limit, now represented by the woman's balcony, he sees his own image dying.

The story can be interpreted as the failure of reality to shelter the character. It is an excellent example of how the classic motif of the threshold can be adapted into contemporary fantastic fiction. Millás echoes contemporary concerns with uprootedness and feeling out of place on home ground. The title cleverly keeps the ambiguity: 'the empty house' could be any of the three houses (family house-new apartment-fictional woman's apartment), and at the same time none of them are 'home'. He is in constant exodus, from one house to the other. Only the balcony, the aperture into the fantastic, fills up his void. The beautiful final sentence: 'he got to love her so much that he conformed with her not disappearing before him'<sup>8</sup> (*ibid.*, p.288) shows how, to this lonely man with no home, she acts as shelter on the other

side of the abyss. The discourse of the limit in this short-story emphasises not so much the threat of going into an unknown space (for example, a haunted house) but, rather, the feeling of becoming strange or displaced in your own home.

### **In search of an order: the dissolution of words in José María Merino's 'Las palabras del mundo' ('The Words of the World' 1990)**

In José María Merino's story, the discourse of the limit acquires a more abstract expression: its dissolution is what matters. Language, the key tool with which to give definition to thought and to communicate in society, disintegrates as the character of the story. As it will be argued, the author incorporates approaches concerning self and language by theorists such as Derrida and Wittgenstein.<sup>9</sup> The story is built upon the reflection of words and their efficacy to define and recalls Wittgenstein's famous aphorisms, 'The limits of my language means the limits of my world' (2001, p.129) or 'Language is a part of our organism and no less complicated than it'. (*ibid.*, p.130)

The plot follows the story of a PhD student, Celina Vallejo, who is investigating the cause of Professor Souto's disappearance. He had progressively suffered from a 'loss of words', which left him unable to relate signifier to signified. Therefore, he resorted to writing short sentences in a notebook that he would recite as the only means to express himself and interact with the world. This also failed, leaving him with only incoherent sounds. This dissolution of words equates to his eventual disappearance.

Order and disorder are constantly confronted. Professor Souto, previously a man of scrupulous habits and discipline, finds his world descending into chaos after his incident with words. Celina's thesis or Souto's research on phonology are presented as highly structured works, as opposed to Souto's notebooks, which contain random sentences and scrabbles. And finally, words that are formed by an ordered linguistic code disintegrate and become 'phonemes: water that flows' (*ibid.*, p.267):

At that stage he already experienced great difficulty in interpreting any domestic conversation, because even the most elementary 'good morning' turned, to his perception, into an incomprehensible phonic amalgam. (*ibid.*, p.264)

What 'frames' words slowly disappears. They lose their shape and become sounds. The disappearance of language equates to oblivion. Allegorically, Professor Souto becomes more and more isolated until he physically disappears. In his notebook, he writes 'only what is written exists... Do not forget the letters or everything will disappear' and 'I forget the letters. It is the end' (*ibid.*, p.269).

As with the balcony in 'The Empty House', the border is an abyss whose ultimate crossing is self-destruction. He drives out of his city, Madrid, to Finisterre. This last place is located on the cliffy coast of the Atlantic. It is the famous end site of the pilgrimage *Camino de Santiago* and is also a symbol of the edge of a spiritual journey.<sup>10</sup> The author of the story, Galician and connoisseur of the area he is describing, metaphorically chooses this location to refer to the end of a vital stage. Professor Souto stops the car at the edge of a cliff, facing the sea, and there he vanishes for good. In the car, his clothes are found 'as if they dressed a person but without the volume that gave them shape' (*ibid.*, p.274). In the end, his isolation is absolute: his connection to mankind (language) has gone. The only thing he is capable

of communicating with and understanding are the sounds that emanate from nature. His disappearance is a physical 'erasure' and fusion with nature. His last words are 'pure natural sounds that lacked, just like a stream, any sense' (*ibid.*, p.272).

This fantastic text is a reflection on the futile and manipulative condition of words and the difficulty of communication. Merino expresses an important aspect of post-modern narrative: he reflects the idea of words as not being unequivocal and efficient to communicate. The problem of representing the self is not only due to its essentially fragmented state, like the famous quote by Rimbaud announced: 'je est un autre', but is also caused by the limitations of its own medium: language. And as Merino has identified, that is an ideal ground for the fantastic to operate.

The fantastic genre shows its dynamism by renovating traditional motifs (i.e. house-home) and integrating more post-modern ones (i.e. the limits of communication). In order to produce this effect, the text still needs to establish a border to later transgress it. The fantastic author creates a limit that separates the realm of the real and that of the impossible. The interaction between the two realms is often portrayed through the symbol of the threshold or by other liminal images. As described, the liminal is an essential constituent in the genesis of the fantastic effect and it provokes a deeply dislocating sensation in the character and the reader.

As mentioned in the introduction, the changes in how space is perceived, including the notions of border, home and movement, have had a major impact in the evolution of the fantastic genre. This is deeply influenced by the change in scientific and socio-historical paradigms of the notion of 'reality' and the aesthetic representation of it. The latest research in Theoretical Physics, Neurobiology, Philosophy, Literary and Communication Theories among other disciplines has established and still is investigating how the category of the real is mutating (see Watzlawick, 1989). Therefore the fantastic, a genre essentially preoccupied with the challenge and transgression of the real, is now of great appeal to contemporary writers. A good example of this is the effervescent Spanish production in the genre nowadays, represented by the authors analysed in this paper (Juan José Millás and Jose María Merino) together with many others such as Cristina Fernández-Cubas, Ángel Olgoso, Elia Barceló, Miguel Ángel Muñoz and David Roas.

Contemporary forms of the genre integrate this notion of the real as essentially absurd, dislocating, unstable and uncertain. The Spanish authors examined in this brief essay show an increasing tendency to unveil the absurdity that rules our everyday lives. The centre and the borders that we trace to move safely in our everyday places are unstable. Millás and Merino want to show in their work how something as familiar as our 'home', the place where we feel most safe, can easily become foreign. Something as normal as the language we use to communicate, to define ourselves, can become strange and lose its precision. All it takes sometimes is forgetting a word or crossing a balcony.

## Bibliography:

- ALAZRAKI, J., 1983. *En busca del unicornio: los cuentos de Julio Cortázar. Elementos para una poética de lo neofantástico*. Madrid: Gredos
- ARMITT, L., 1996. *Theorising the Fantastic*. London: Arnold
- BACHELARD, G., 1969. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon
- BARRENECHEA, A. M., 1991. El género fantástico entre los códigos y los contextos. In: Morillas Ventura (ed.), *El relato fantástico en España e Hispanoamérica*, Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario-Editorial Siruela, pp.75-81
- BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- CAILLOIS, R., 1970. *Images, Images*, Paris: Stock
- CAMPRA, R., 2000. *Territori della finzioni. Il fantastico in letteratura*, Roma: Carocci
- CASTEX, P.-G., 1951. *Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant*, Paris: S.E.D.E.S
- CHANADY, A. B., 1985. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved vs. Unresolved Antinomy*. New York: Garland
- CORNWELL, N., 1990. *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- DERRIDA, J., 1977. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- DOLEZEL, L., 1988. Mimesis and possible worlds. In: Garrido D. (ed). *Teorías de la ficción literaria*. Madrid: Arco Libros
- HUME, K., 1984. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. London: Routledge
- JACKSON, R., 1981. *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion*. New York: New Accents
- MERINO, J. M., 2008. 'Las palabras del mundo'. In: Roas & Casas (ed.). *La Realidad Oculta: cuentos fantásticos españoles del siglo XX*. Menoscuarto: Palencia
- MILLÁS, J. J., 2008. 'La casa vacía'. In: Roas & Casas (ed.). *La Realidad Oculta: cuentos fantásticos españoles del siglo XX*. Menoscuarto: Palencia
- RABKIN, E., 1977. *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- ROAS, D. (ed.) 2001. *Teorías de lo fantástico*, Madrid: Arco/Libros
- TODOROV, T., 1970. *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Seuil
- TURNER, V., 1969. *The Ritual Process*. New York: Gruyter
- VAN GENNEP, A., 1909. *Les Rites de Passage*. London: Routledge
- VAX, L., 1963, *L'Art et la littérature fantastiques*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (Coll. Que sais-je?)
- WATZLAWICK, P., 1989. *The Invented Reality*. New York, London: Norton

WITTGENSTEIN, L., 2001. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. London: Routledge.

### Notes:

- 1 For further reference see Pierre-Georges Castex (1951), *Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant* and Louis Vax (1963), *L'Art et la littérature fantastiques*.
- 2 One example would be Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) where, in the beginning, there is the doubt of whether Count Dracula is human or vampire, dead or alive, but towards the end this doubt is resolved; he is indeed a vampire.
- 3 Fantasy or the Marvellous do not present this coexistence as problematic, they introduce another possible world with a usually happy ending to the encounter. In Magical Realism, there is an absolute equivalence between the real and the imaginary, it is a magical conception of the world. Surrealism is an extension of our concept of the real, for example, by the inclusion of unconscious mental states; and the Science-Fiction text is built on the presumption that the imaginary world is possible, but in the future.
- 4 All translations from the Spanish are my own.
- 5 George Perec's *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris: Galilée 1974) is another good example.
- 6 On Julio Cortázar's contribution to the fantastic genre, see Jaime Alazraki's *En busca del unicornio: los cuentos de Julio Cortázar. Elementos para una poética de lo neofantástico* (Madrid: Gredos, 1983).
- 7 'La Deshabitada' in the Spanish original text.
- 8 In the original text: 'había llegado a amarla tanto que se conformó con que no desapareciera antes que él' (p.288).
- 9 One of Derrida's most innovative contributions is the notion that reality is full of 'undecidables' (*indécidables*), concepts that cannot be expressed by words because they inhabit a zone between oppositional logics, e.g. life vs death (in *Of Grammatology*, 1977).
- 10 The Camino de Santiago is a famous pilgrimage route. Most pilgrims start in the border between France and Spain and walk towards Santiago de Compostela or Finisterre in Galicia. Among the various reasons for reaching the end of the journey are religion, penance, retreat and spirituality.

## Poetic identities in times of flux: Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gaston Miron

MUIREANN LEONARD

*University of Limerick*

The American and Québécois poets, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919- ) and Gaston Miron (1928-1996), pursued remarkably parallel careers in the fields of poetry and publishing over the second half of the twentieth century. Their simultaneous rise to prominence in the 1950s was facilitated by the vast social, political and literary upheavals permeating the entire North American continent, and their work helped pioneer new eras in American and Québécois literature. Both poets were firmly committed to the public interest and this was reflected in their political activism, in the anti-establishment ethos of their publishing houses and in the topical subject matter of much of their poetry. They re-invested poetry with a social and cultural immediacy which it had not always enjoyed in the twentieth century. In the hands of both poets, poetry was re-invented as a medium through which their surrounding collectives could be re-awakened to the reality confronting them. In this regard, much of their poetry can be viewed as particular to a specific historical moment and they are, therefore, very much poets of their time. They are also poets of the timeless, however, as, in conjunction with their active interrogation of the pressing concerns of the day, they also simultaneously explore a myriad of topics invested with the trans-historical quality of being pertinent to the human condition outside of time or place. This aspect of their poetry is searching and personal but complements the public aspect of their work in that it provides a rounded understanding of the poetic identity of both men. The similarity of direction in the careers of Ferlinghetti and Miron is highly interesting, but so, too, is their divergence of opinion on topics in both the public and personal spheres. This paper concerns itself with the issues implicit in a comparative study of this kind, a study which seeks to engage with the cultural and poetic identity of both men through an analysis of the social and literary influences which informed their burgeoning careers and through a close examination of the co-existence of the timely and the timeless in their work. The primary texts for analysis are Ferlinghetti's *These Are My Rivers* and Miron's *L'Homme Rapailé*, both collections of the poets' selected works.

To begin at the beginning, it goes without saying that, before embarking on my comparative study of the work of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gaston Miron, it was necessary to establish what key areas I wished to address and what angle would best accommodate my chosen topics. In this, my preliminary interrogation of what would constitute a sound basis from which to launch a coherent and convincing comparative study, I returned perpetually to the broad and rather obvious aforementioned questions

of poetic and cultural identity. Alongside these concerns were the gargantuan topics of language and nationalism, topics which demanded a thorough and detailed examination, but which I could not hope to treat individually as by their very nature they overlapped and intertwined endlessly within the poetry of both men. In an interview given in 1993, moreover, Gaston Miron revealed with characteristic candour and, perhaps, a sneaking pride that he had been branded 'le seul poète qui n'avait pas honte d'associer la poésie à l'ontologie' (Gauvin, 1999, p.108) ['the only poet who was not ashamed to associate poetry with ontology' (my translation)], going on to say, 'La poésie, pour moi, c'est la révélation de l'être' (1999, p.108) ['Poetry, for me, is the revelation of being' (my translation)]. His pride was misplaced, however. He was not alone. In his ever-evolving *ars poetica*, *Poetry As Insurgent Art*, the American poet, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, also revealed a similar aesthetic sensibility when he wrote, 'The poet is the master ontologist, constantly questioning existence and reinventing it (2007, p.53) [... A poem] is a realization of the subjective, the inner life of being' (2007, p.56). Such concise explanations regarding the personal function of an author's vocation must necessarily play a key role in any serious exploration of their work. For all their concision, however, such insights raise a myriad of theoretical questions, most notably when one intends a detailed study of the cultural and poetic identity of their authors.

The essential problematic revolves around a central tension, however. On the one hand, if Ferlinghetti and Miron's declarations are to be taken at face value, their poetry becomes a metaphysical exposition of the self through which an essential nature can be identified. On the other hand, recent theoretical developments regarding the issue of identity suggest that the concept must be uprooted from its

... settled semantic career [... as] that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already 'the same', identical to itself across time... (Hall 1996, p.3)

and instead should be interpreted (and here Stuart Hall refers to cultural identity) as 'the process of becoming rather than being' (1996, p.4). We are faced, therefore, with what appear to be two contradictory schools of thought; with the opposition between the innate subjectivity of the individual and its objective deconstruction as a social phenomenon.

The vaguest knowledge of Ferlinghetti and Miron's work, moreover, would appear to ostensibly contradict the notion that their poetry is purely concerned with ontology. As fervent political activists, their consistent commitment to the collective invests much of their work with allusions firmly grounded in the realms of the public. Their primary concern is often to awaken the reader to the immediacy of the social reality surrounding them. The subject matter of much of their work and their advocacy of contemporary causes outside the poetic domain further the assertion that they are in many ways socially conditioned poets of their time, a significant part of whose work, and by consequence whose identity, can be deconstructed along the lines of exterior social, historical and cultural forces. This is a claim they would not deny of course. It would appear, therefore, that neither poet should be classified according to either theoretical supposition but should enjoy a harmonious middle-ground between the two.

A mere glance at the titles of the primary texts under scrutiny, moreover, at once reveals Ferlinghetti and Miron's awareness of this, the most engaging and, by the

same token, the most problematic aspect, to be encountered in a comparative study of this nature; the impossibility of pure dissection. Ferlinghetti's *These Are My Rivers* and Miron's *L'Homme Rapailé* (The Pieced-Together Man) are aptly titled collections of the poets' selected works in that they insist upon the multi-faceted basis of their authors' poetic journey. Identity, as the titles assert, is not a given. It is not a single, solitary river which, arising from its source, maintains one unerring path to the sea. Neither is it a smooth and flawless portrait of an individual subject as it embarks upon the road from birth to death. It is rather a collection of rivers (tributaries of each other at times perhaps) destined to converge, diverge and, at intervals, remain wholly separate in their perpetual progression through life. Similarly, Heraclitus' assertion that one can never encounter the same river twice lends itself interestingly to such a metaphorical representation of identity as Ferlinghetti's. Identities are continuously in flux, Ferlinghetti appears to say, and escape the mathematical breakdown which is often reserved them. In Miron's case, the poet is a 'pieced-together' collage of various competing components. He is assembled according to a myriad of cultural, social, historical and metaphysical forces which ultimately deny him any kind of coherent uniformity. This may be true of all poets but, as I have discovered in my endeavour to explore identity issues *chez* Ferlinghetti and Miron, the task is imbued with a more daunting aspect. In order to go some way to understanding their identities as poets, a study of both the objective and subjective worlds must necessarily be employed. In the case of both Ferlinghetti and Miron, the cultural *is* the political and their poetic vocation is inseparable from both as the two poets undertook significant public profiles in their firm commitment to the collective interest. Similarly, the ontological world view which informs much of their poetry cannot be diminished. In this regard, while both firmly grounded in their American and Québécois cultures, Ferlinghetti and Miron demonstrate a sincere understanding of, and interest in, the human experience outside their respective cultural collectives. Miron himself has stated that: 'Le plus grand poète politique de l'Espagne, c'est Lorca, parce qu'il exprime au plus haut degré le fait d'être espagnol et homme à la fois' (1998, p.201) [Spain's greatest political poet is Lorca because he expresses to the greatest degree what it is like to be at once a Spaniard and a man (trans. Plourde 1984, p.109)].

In the same way, while maintaining a definite public commitment within their respective societies, Ferlinghetti and Miron nonetheless explore in their poetry the personal concerns they experience as individuals on a day-to-day basis. Poetry still holds for them the cathartic quality of questioning the most profound and rudimentary aspects of our existence as human beings. The question now became one of how a comparative analysis which sought to embrace such vast and varied aspects of these poets' work could be structurally and coherently achieved. I finally decided that my primary focus should now revolve around the umbrella concept of Ferlinghetti and Miron's poetic identity and how this ebbs and flows intrinsically, through the public and the personal, the timely and the timeless. Based on such an interpretation, Ferlinghetti and Miron's concept of poetry would be treated as indeed a revelation of the poets' identity, but there would nevertheless be a systematic approach to the subject as emblematic of a conglomeration of conflicting and complimentary forces.

As my intention to study these poets was precipitated by the compelling similarities I initially observed in Ferlinghetti and Miron's concurrent appearance on the literary stage in the fields of poetry and publishing in mid-twentieth century the USA and Québec respectively, and in their pronounced commitment to the public interest, I believed an investigation of identity on numerous levels would reveal the

primary catalysts responsible for such cross-cultural cohesion. I decided, therefore, that a detailed social, cultural and historical analysis would be my principal *point de départ* for, to quote Stuart Hall again:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power... (1996, p.4).

It was evidently such 'historical and institutional sites' that facilitated the striking similarities in Ferlinghetti and Miron's careers, but it is also within these sites, namely in the power structures inherent in language and culture, that the noteworthy differences in their literary vocations can also be found.

As the mid-twentieth century generated a call for social and political change across much of the North American continent, such notes of dissent must necessarily sound in the literature of the day. While the USA and Québec were both hotbeds of unrest at this point in history, the contrasting nature of the respective cultural backgrounds of Ferlinghetti and Miron proved to be an interesting topic for examination. While such an analysis may prove straightforward for the most part, the question of the literary field arises, in this context, as quite the labyrinthine dilemma, demanding much close and studied attention. In this particular context, when presented with a viable strand for comparison one turns the corner only to find oneself confronted with a glaring question not yet considered. Both poets were, of course, strongly influenced by the literary tradition of their separate societies, in all its guises of tyranny and paternalism. However, where contemporary literary practice in the US propelled Ferlinghetti's creativity forward, Miron was subjected to a quagmire of stifling literary and cultural conflict. Furthermore, while both American and Québécois writers suffered the same contradictory relationship with the literary canon of France, where glorification and rejection existed side by side, Ferlinghetti had inherited a literary and cultural freedom which Miron had yet to enjoy. Both Ferlinghetti and Miron, although operating from a similar vantage point within the literary field, were nonetheless emblematic of, and receptive to, the disparity in the cultural contexts which inform their work. I decided that a searching analysis of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed '(la) prise de position' (1992, p.321) or 'position-taking' (trans. Emanuel 1996, p.231) within the dominant fields of cultural production should serve as the foundation of a theoretical framework from which to solidify the various comparative and contrasting elements in relation to this question of the literary field.

After having established such a social, literary and historical background to the study it was then necessary to decide how best to proceed with the sites for comparison I had chosen in the public, personal, timely and timeless aspects of Ferlinghetti and Miron's work. The pitfall encountered most frequently in this regard was the danger of adopting the public and the timely, and the personal and the timeless, as synonymous terms. While the public and the timely both correspond intrinsically to an observation of these poets' identity as firmly rooted in a particular social and historical moment, the inadvertent tendency presented itself to associate, in a like manner, the personal with the timeless. With this in mind I chose to proceed with the public and timely nature of Ferlinghetti and Miron's work as an objective manifestation of how both poets operated within Bourdieu's *positions* within the literary field. In other words, I would look at how they utilized these positions as conscious participants in their respective social spheres, in their public roles as

cultural commentators and political activists. My primary focus would be on the social value of poetry and how poetry as an art form impacts the public collective when released from its traditional confinement in academia. I have chosen here extracts from two poems which aptly demonstrate Ferlinghetti and Miron's social implication. The first is Ferlinghetti's 'The World is a Beautiful Place...' where the poet states;

Oh the world is a beautiful place  
to be born into  
if you don't much mind  
a few dead minds  
in the higher places  
or a bomb or two  
now and then  
in your upturned faces  
or such other improprieties  
as our Name Brand society  
is prey to  
with its men of distinction  
and its men of extinction  
and its priests  
and other patrolmen  
and its various segregations  
and congressional investigations  
and other constipations  
that our fool flesh  
is heir to (1994, pp.73-74)

and the second is Miron's 'Sur la Place Publique – recours didactique' ('A Lesson in Commitment') in which the poet declares:

Or je vois nos êtres en détresse dans le siècle  
je vois notre infériorité et j'ai mal en chacun de nous  
... Les poètes de ce temps montent la garde au monde  
... Je suis sur la place publique avec les miens  
la poésie n'a pas à rougir de moi  
j'ai su qu'une espérance soulevait ce monde jusqu'ici.  
(1998, pp.99-100)

[Now I see how we are in want in this century  
I see our inferiority and within each of us I grieve  
... The poets of our age mount guard for the world  
... I am with my people in the public square  
poetry needn't blush for me  
I understood that hope bore our world here.  
(trans. Plourde 1984, pp.47-49)]

Public poetry readings in San Francisco, the similarities and contrasts in the publishing careers of Ferlinghetti and Miron, as well as significant divergences in their poetic vocations regarding the topics of language and nationalism would also be addressed, as would their convergent concerns with regard to capitalism. I would also make reference to the poets as symbolic of Baudelaire/Benjamin's *flâneur*, in their

denunciation of societal wrongs through an objective lens of detachment, evident in the urban setting of much of their poetry.

I would then utilize the concept of *flânerie* as a transitional bridge and afford it more in-depth analysis in my treatment of the personal and the timeless, as it marks the threshold between the public and private spheres. The poet contributes to the public interest in his role as the isolated societal observer, but necessarily suffers the sharpness of his alienation as a manifestation of the nature of being. Despite the public implication of their work, neither Ferlinghetti nor Miron can fully conform to the social nature of the modern, urban landscape. Ferlinghetti utilizes this alienation in order to better understand the human condition, making detailed observations of the city-dwellers he encounters. Miron, on the other hand, experiences a desperate *malaise* in the urban setting which forces him to question the very nature of his existence. Death, light and dark, and the nature of human relationships all feature strongly in this work as does the quest for a deeper spiritual truth. The journey they embark upon in this type of poetry is an intensely personal one. It can be introspective and, at times, is painfully so. In times like this the poet's interest lies in transcending his public obligations in order to launch an in-depth inquiry into who he is as an individual. His interest is in addressing the timeless concerns which have occupied man's thoughts through history, regardless of time or place. While these poems are intensely personal in subject matter, it could be argued that they also reveal many timely concerns of the poets. I do not conflate the personal with the timeless, therefore. What I do attest, however, is that these subjects are endowed with a timeless quality in that they continue to be of striking personal relevance to the reader outside of the moment in which they were written. In this regard the poet transcends his time and achieves a timeless immortality through his work. It is in this poetry, therefore, that Ferlinghetti and Miron's self-confessed preoccupation with ontology reveals itself. For Ferlinghetti and Miron, the liberation inherent in poetry is contingent upon reflection above and beyond the concrete and overt. Not only are the confines of the social exposed through the objective analysis of the poet, the reversion to the inner world of the subjective also serves as an espousal of personal freedom for both the poet and reader alike, for as David Meltzer observes, 'A poem can be both an immediate and timeless source of information, revelation and pleasure' (1971, p.4).

As I have stated, both poets are profoundly committed to their surrounding collectives and through their efforts poetry is invested with a public resonance which re-integrates all levels of society in a mutual quest for meaning. This quest has many layers which endlessly merge and diverge within their work. In its most basic terms, it can be characterised as a piercing and exploratory investigation into what it means to be a poet, as part of a temporal social and cultural unit, and what it means to be a human being, within or outside the confines of any particular historical moment. They are, therefore, poets of their time and poets of the timeless in that their concerns consistently move between the actual and the eternal in order that they may gain, and share, a deeper knowledge of who we are. Bourdieu probably best summarizes how Ferlinghetti and Miron, as individuals, deal with the tension they experience between who they are socially and personally; they write. For, as he states:

L'écriture abolit les déterminations, les contraintes et les limites qui sont constitutives de l'existence sociale: exister socialement, c'est occuper une position déterminée dans la structure sociale et en porter les marques, sous la forme notamment d'automatistes verbaux ou de mécanismes mentaux, c'est aussi dépendre, tenir et être tenu, bref *appartenir* à des groupes et être enserré dans les réseaux de relations qui ont l'objectivité, l'opacité et la permanence de la chose et

qui se rappellent sous forme d'obligations, de dettes, de devoirs, bref de contrôles et de contraintes. (1992, p.53)

[Writing abolishes the determinations, constraints and limits which are constitutive of social existence: to exist socially means to occupy a determined position in the social structure and to bear the marks of it, especially in the form of verbal automatisms or mental mechanisms; it also means to depend on, to hold to and to be held by, in short, *to belong to* groups and be enclosed in networks of relations which have objectivity, opacity and permanency, and which show themselves in the form of obligations, debts, duties – in short controls and constraints. (trans. Emanuel 1996, p.27)]

Writing exists for Ferlinghetti and Miron as a cathartic function through which the social implications and impositions of their respective societies can be revealed and exploded. The act of poetry challenges and expels the 'determinations, constraints and limits' under which they labour as individuals but also serves the collective purpose of awakening the audience to the limitations of their own social situation and to the limitless wonder of the subjective. In this way, the poetry of Ferlinghetti and Miron becomes a revelation of identity on many levels. The effect created is an interesting interplay, or co-existence, between the timely and the timeless and between the public and the personal.

### Bibliography:

BOURDIEU, P., 1992. *Les Règles de l'art – Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Coll. Libre Examen. Paris: Editions du Seuil [BOURDIEU, P., 1996. *The Rules of Art – Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Trans. Emanuel, S., Cambridge: Polity Press]

FERLINGHETTI, L., 2007. *Poetry as Insurgent Art*. New York: New Directions

\_\_\_\_\_, 1994. *These Are My Rivers - New and Selected Poems 1955-1993*. New York: New Directions

GAUVIN, L., 1999. 'Malmener la langue' (interview with Gaston Miron). *IN:*

REUZEAU, J.-Y., (Ed.) *Dossier Gaston Miron*. Pantin (France): Le Castor Astral, p.99-115

HALL, S., 1996. 'Introduction – "Who Needs "Identity"?"' *In:* Hall, S., and du Gay, P. (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, p.1-17

MELTZER, D., 1971. Introduction in Meltzer, D. (ed.), *The San Francisco Poets*. New York: Ballantine Books Inc., p.1-8

MIRON, G., 1984. *Embers and Earth (Selected Poems)*. Trans. Jones, D.G., and Plourde, M., Montreal: Guernica Editions

\_\_\_\_\_, 1998. *L'Homme Rapailé*. Montréal: Editions TYPO (Presses de l'Université de Montréal, for the first edition, 1970).

# Animal writing: José Ángel Valente and Giorgio Agamben

Manus O Duibhir

*University of Santiago de Compostela*

This article reads the poetry and thought of the Spanish post-war poet José Ángel Valente in terms of the concept of animality and through the work of the contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben. But Valente's work can also be understood in terms of a perhaps related idea, the Messianic. That is, in terms of beginnings and ends. Valente's own beginning and end are relevant here. He was born in 1929, close to the year of birth of two writers with whom he shares common intellectual commitments – Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Valente holds in common with Foucault and Derrida a concern with the body, with the ash, which is expressed from the astonishing first poem (here I reproduce the final seven lines) from Valente's first collection, *A Modo de Esperanza* [By Way of Hope].

## **Serán Ceniza**

Toco esta mano al fin que comparte mi vida  
y en ella me confirmo  
y siento cuanto amo,  
lo levanto hacia el cielo  
y aunque sea ceniza lo proclamo: ceniza.  
Aunque sea ceniza cuanto tengo hasta ahora,  
cuanto se me ha tendido  
a modo de esperanza. (2006, p.69)

## **[They will be ash**

I touch this hand with which I share life  
and in it I confirm myself  
and I feel that which I love,  
I raise it to the sky  
and although it is ash I proclaim it: ash.  
Although all that I have until now be only ash,  
all that has been given me in the way of hope. (my translation)]

These lines can be read as a response to the absolute destruction of the body in twentieth-century totalitarianism. The barbarity of the events of that era confirmed for many thinkers the pathological progression of western culture, and much of post-war thought (especially that of those who, like Valente, grew up through war) turns on the question of the validity of, and the exclusions inherent to, occidental reason.

Giorgio Agamben's work is pertinent here. For Agamben, totalitarianism is an ever-present possibility in western democracies. He sees this possibility as a function of what he terms the 'Anthropological Machine' (2005, p.47), the mechanism by which we construct the rational human subject through the exclusion of that which

remains a constitutive exclusion – animal or bare life. Agamben understands this inclusive exclusion as fundamental to the origins of democracy, but he also sees it at the end of history, and here the year of Valente’s death, 2000 (perhaps the last year in which the so-called end of history could hope to be taken seriously), is relevant. Agamben explores this concept in his meditation on the relationship between human and animal, *L’aperto. L’uomo e l’animale* (The Open: Man and Animal – 2002). Starting with a discussion of a medieval representation of the last day, in which the saved are represented as bestial, Agamben moves to Alexandre Kojève’s predictions regarding the animalisation of the human at the Hegelian end of history. According to Kojève, post-war United States society implied the impossibility of meaningful historical action. The human under these circumstances loses an essential aspect of its humanity but remains ‘in life as an animal in harmony with nature and with the given being’ (in Agamben, 2005, p.16, my translation). The human becomes animal at the end of history, but it is interesting that Kojève defines this post-history in terms that are recognisable from the pre-historic world of pastoral. This is a world where ‘all the rest can be maintained indefinitely; art, love play, etc., and, ultimately, all that makes man happy’ (*ibid.*, my translation). The happiness referred to seems similar to the *otium* of the pastoral (it is notable that Agamben discusses the etymology of this term, relating it to the void or emptiness, in his *Idea della Prosa* (Idea of Prose – 1985). Animality then, in this scheme, is present in both pre- and post-history, and its suppression or excision is a vital part of western societies and cultures.

This excision is central to Agamben’s perhaps best known work, *Homo Sacer*, which bases itself upon the Aristotelian distinction between *Bios* (social life) and *Zoe* (bare life common to humans, gods, and animals). Bare life, for Agamben, is that which is necessarily excluded from the polis, but is at the same time its foundation. He writes: ‘In western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men’ (1998, p.7). It is through the politicisation of bare life, or what Michel Foucault (1990) identifies as the ‘bio-politics’ central to modernity that the humanity of the living is decided. This process is revealed in the *Homo Sacer* or Sacred Man, who Agamben understands as the marginal figure who cannot be sacrificed but can be killed. The fact that the status of human can be withheld by sovereign decree (for example the with-holding of rights in the concentration camps) reveals the construction of the rational human on the basis of the caesura of *Zoe* and *Bios*, a mechanism which Agamben claims to be a fundamental element of western societies and which makes them potentially totalitarian. Language is important here, and Agamben reminds us of its centrality to Aristotle’s definition of the human as the speaking animal. The movement from bare life to politics is essentially the same as the move from voice (*phone*) to language (*logos*). Politics exists, according to Agamben, because man is the ‘living being who, *in language*, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life as an inclusive exclusion’ (1998, p.8 – my italics).

It is significant that the difference between human and animal is based on language, and it is no surprise that Agamben’s work on animality has a relevance to poetry, a fact that is confirmed in an article he writes about Valente, ‘No Amanece el Cantor’ (The Singer does not Wake) in the collection *En torno a la Obra de José Ángel Valente* (On the Work of José Ángel Valente – 1996). Agamben starts with the problem of life and poetry. He separates theories in which life and poetry are dissolved into each other from theories in which they are divided. Agamben opposes to these views the experience of the poet:

Contra ambas posiciones está la experiencia del poeta, que afirma que si poesía y vida, o lo poetizado y lo vivido, divergen infinitamente en el plano de la biografía y de la psicología del individuo psicósomático, vuelven sin embargo a confundirse en el punto de su recíproca desobjectivación. (1996, p.48)

[Against both positions is the experience of the poet, who confirms that if poetry and life, or the poetized and the lived, diverge infinitely on the level of the biography and psychology of the psychosomatic individual, they are confounded at the point of their reciprocal disobjectivisation. (my translation)]

Agamben returns to the prologue to the Gospel of Saint John (so central to Valente's poetics) and to its earliest version, which states that that which was generated in the word was life – '*quod factum est in ipso vita erat*' (in 1996, p.48). The poet is he who engenders life through the word, but the type of life that is generated is important; life here has nothing to do with the biography of the poet, nor does the word have to do with the discourse of the subject of language. Concentrating on the troubadour poets, Agamben elaborates: 'The problem is, for the troubadours, not the putting of biographical experiences into words, but the attempt to experience the live happening of language as a fundamentally amorous experience' (1996, p.49 – my translation). It is in this sense that love exists as the foundation of song for the troubadours – precisely because it is that which produces the destruction of difference, the intimate union between poetry and life. In this moment:

... la poesía, el poeta mismo, son aquí un laboratorio en que todas las figuras conocidas de la subjetividad están, por así decirlo, dislocadas, alteradas, transformadas: todas las figuras conocidas de la subjetividad, de la individualidad psicósomática están alteradas, transformadas en figuras subhumanas, subdivinas, metahumanas (1996, p.51).

[... poetry, the poet himself, are... a laboratory in which all the known figures of subjectivity are...dislocated, altered, transformed: all the known figures of subjectivity, of the psychosomatic individual are altered, transformed in subhuman, subdivine, metahuman figures. (my translation)]

The return to the originary movement of language entails a return to either animal or angelic status, and it is important to remember here Aristotle's definition of *Zoe* or 'bare' life as common to Gods and animals, a conception which seems to tie in with Kojève's confabulation of pre- and post-history.

Valente's poetry aspires to this original experience of language, and it is significant that, in a singular case of poetic intertextuality, Valente himself repeats elements of Agamben's reading of him in one of his final public appearances, at the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* in Madrid in the year 1999, published (along with an audio-recording of the event) as *Palabra y Materia* (Word and Matter). But the poet's thought as regards the themes discussed here are perhaps best expressed in an essay 'La Lengua de los Pájaros' (The Language of Birds) contained in the collection *Elogio al Calígrafo* (In Praise of the Calligrapher). In this essay, Valente describes the pre-historic garden, or Eden, in which there was a harmonious relationship and communication between the human and the animal and natural world. The language spoken in this realm was 'la lengua de los pájaros' (the language of the birds) (2006, p.514 – my translation). The primordial fall shatters a unity of being and provokes the desire to recuperate this loss common to all cultures. Valente describes the shaman of

tribal culture as the proto-poet, because it is he who invokes magic words, ‘the language of the birds’ which ‘permite establecer una comunicación con los estados superiores del ser’ (allows a communication with the superior states of being – 2006, p.515 – my translation) in which unity is regained. While the garden is the scene of the fall, it is also the scene of the possible return to grace. It is the place where Adam named the animals and birds, the place of

... la palabra generadora que a su vez genera, incluso después de la culpa, para que la narración y el tiempo puedan existir. La caída no interrumpe al orden de la creación por la palabra, sino que, por el contrario, hace que esa palabra sea en la sucesión de los tiempos un intento perpetuo de volver al origen de la creación, a la lengua unitaria que permitía la natural comunicación de los vivientes, la lengua de los pájaros. (2006: 518)

[... the generating word which at the same time generates, even after original sin, so that narration and time can exist. The fall does not interrupt creation through the word, but, conversely, causes that word throughout time to be a perpetual attempt to return to the origin of creation, to the unitary language which permits the natural communication of the living, the language of the birds. (my translation)]

The garden is the place of generation of life through the word, and the language we have now perpetually reaches back to that moment of generation. That is why Valente perceives Eden as the ‘jardín perdido y jardín prometido. ¿Lugar de la expulsión y lugar de la promesa?’ (paradise lost and paradise promised. Place of the expulsion and place of the promise? – 2006, p.518 – my translation). Here there is a clear parallel with Agamben’s interest in the animalisation of the human at the end of history. The garden is the paradisiacal space outside of language and poetry, it is the vehicle through which we attempt to regain that which has been lost. The movement toward animality entails an inverse linguistic dynamic to that of the fall. As opposed to the dispersion and proliferation of language, the annihilation of the human subject implies the annihilation of language. What remains in post-history is the silence towards which poetry tends.

The importance of silence is rightly identified as central to Valente’s poetics (Jiménez Heffernan [1998: 328] mentions three collections of commentary – *Material Valente*, *En torno a la obra de Valente*, and *La voz y la escucha* – which coincide in their evaluation of this theme as central to Valente’s work). Silence is also pertinent to an essay in which Agamben discusses the ‘*Idea del Nome*’ (Idea of the Name) in the collection *Idea della Prosa*. Returning to the prologue to the Gospel of Saint John, he explores the concept of revelation: the word in the beginning is revelation; it does not presuppose anything but itself. The word does not say anything about the world; rather, it is an incomprehensible generative space which allows for the possibility of language. The name of God, or the name that names language, is therefore a name without meaning. Similarly, Valente’s poetics aspires to the word which ‘no conlleva, al menos en el uso normal del término, ninguna información... No comunica propiamente, sino que convoca o llama hacia el interior de si misma.’ (‘does not carry, at least in the normal use of the term, any information... It does not really communicate, but calls to the interior of itself’ –2006, p.25 – my translation), and his poetry circles around the idea of silence and generative empty spaces:

## Palabra

Palabra  
Hecha de nada

Rama  
en el aire vacío

Ala  
Sin pájaro

Vuelo  
Sin ala

Órbita  
de qué centro desnuda  
de toda imagen.

Luz,  
donde aún no forma  
su innumerable rostro lo visible. (2006, p.378)

## [Word

Word  
made of nothing

Branch  
in the empty air

Wing  
without bird

Orbit  
of what nude centre  
of every image.

Light,  
where still is not formed  
the innumerable face of the visible. (my translation)]

What is important here is the concept of ‘groundedness’. The ground for reason is itself irrational, an empty incomprehensible space or bare voice, and this is a conclusion which is at the heart of much post-modern thought. Agamben, in the same essay, highlights the paradoxical fact that language is able to name that of which it cannot speak: ‘... the unsayable is not that which is in no way attested to in language, but that which, in language, can only be named. Whereas the sayable is that of which one can speak in defining discourse, even should it finally lack a name of its own.’ (1995, p.105) Mysticism perceives the impossibility of confounding the plane of naming with that of the proposition: ‘The name enters, to be sure, into propositions, but what they *say* is not that which the name has *called*’ (*ibid.*). What resides at the heart of the proposition is the name of God/language, which is the generative space from which language comes. Language in itself can be named, but we cannot step outside of language to discourse upon it. All that can be said is that language exists – it is not possible to give it positive attributes. Agamben relates these ideas to philosophy in a remarkable final paragraph:

Thought [...] pursues, in the name, the idea. Because, as in the Jewish legend of the *Golem*, the name through which the unformed is called into life is that of truth. And since the first letter of this name has been erased from the forehead

of the terrible *famulus*, thought continues to fix its gaze on that face where now is written the word 'death', till even this is erased. The mute, unreadable forehead remains its only lesson, its only text. (*ibid.*)

Agamben describes the movement from the name – that which creates life (and here it is important to remember his description of the poet as he who creates life in the word) – towards the muteness of the idea. The immaculate perfection of the idea coincides with the generative silence of the unformed in the same way as the divine and the animal coincide in Kojève's post-history. The *Golem* (the mind-controlled clay monster of Jewish tradition) wears the name for truth (Emet) on its forehead, a name which can be changed to the word for death (met). The *Golem* is a monster that is controlled by another, by the one who called it into existence. The *Golem* is a stupid monster, it does not think for itself and obeys blindly – sometimes causing problems for its owners due to its over-literalness (thus echoing the perception of creative activity as dangerously god-defying found in many cultures). It is silent, but it wears the name of truth on its forehead. Poetic truth, the 'clay' materiality of language, is related to death and silence. These concepts are relevant to Valente's poetry, and also to the thought of Paul de Man, especially his well-known essay: 'Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric'.

In this essay de Man explores the notion of anthropomorphism as contained in Nietzsche's famous lines 'truth is an army of tropes' from the essay *Truth and Lie in the Extramoral Sense*. One of the tropes mentioned is anthropomorphism, which de Man differentiates from the others:

But 'anthropomorphism' is not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance. It takes one entity for another and thus implies the constitution of specific entities prior to their confusion, the *taking* of something for something else that can then be assumed to be *given*. Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others. It is no longer a proposition but a proper name, as when the metamorphosis in Ovid's stories culminates and halts in the singleness of a proper name, Narcissus or Daphne or whatever (1984, p.241).

Anthropomorphism is different from the other tropes because its elements are given, or epistemologically resolved. The infinite chain of significant propositions and assertions is frozen in the form of a name that does not permit description, and here we can refer to Agamben's concept of naming – the possibility of naming that of which one cannot speak. De Man finishes his description of anthropomorphism with a reference to Ovid's metamorphosis. Though de Man does not mention it, the tale of Procne, which turns on the idea of the unsayable, helps us to think through Agamben's ideas. The tale culminates in the animalisation of the characters in a moment of extreme violence – after a grotesque act (the feeding of a child to its father) which seems to defy even Philomela's powers of representation. This ultimate, unspeakable violence is represented in the name of an animal. It is possible to read Valente's work in terms of this anthropomorphism of the word.

In a key poem, 'Destrucción del Solitario' ('Destruction of the Solitary') from his first book, *A Modo de Esperanza (By Way of Hope)* Valente explores the relationship between the animate and the inanimate:

Durante la noche contemplé un cuerpo ciego  
Un cuerpo,

nieve de implacable verdad.  
 ¿Con qué animarlo,  
 obligarlo duramente a vivir?  
 Tenía entre mis manos  
 una materia oscura,  
 barro y aire mortal.  
 Y busqué en lo más hondo  
 la palabra,  
 aquélla que da al canto  
 verdadera virtud.  
 Estaba sólo.  
 Un cuerpo ante mis ojos:  
 le di un nombre,/lo llamé hasta mis labios.  
 No lo pude decir.  
 Porque nada podía ser dicho aún (2006, p.76)

[All through the night  
 I contemplated a blind body.  
 A body,  
 white of implacable truth.  
 How to animate it,  
 harshly oblige it into life?  
 I had between my hands  
 a dark material,  
 clay and mortal air,  
 a material resistant to my hands,  
 which I could not defeat.  
 And I looked in the depths  
 for the word  
 that which gives the song  
 true virtue.  
 I was alone.  
 A body in front of my eyes:  
 I gave it a name,  
 I called it to my lips,  
 I couldn't say it.  
 Because nothing could yet be said. (my translation)]

The poem reveals Valente's meta-poetical aesthetic. The 'body' can be read as language, a language which is always other, the glass bottle, in the terminology of Wittgenstein, which surrounds us but from which we cannot escape to contemplate. The problem for the poet is that of expressing a relationship with the materiality of language, with the indescribable materiality of language which Agamben exemplifies in the mortal clay of the golem. To do this the poet attempts to escape the infinite assertion of propositions by freezing this indescribable movement in a name. In Valente's case, it is through an *animalisation* of language through apostrophe, through addressing language configured, through *prosopopeya*, as animal that he will try to resolve this problem. To understand this point it is first important to clarify our terminology.

James J. Paxson, in his *The Poetics of Personification*, investigates the etymology of the term: *prosopopeya* is *prosopon* + *poein*, to make a face. In the legal field, in which Quintilian discusses the question, the problem is centred in the identity of the speaker:

Is the *prosopon* the advocate who speaks 'in behalf' of his client-saying what the client *would say* if the latter could think and speak like a skilled advocate? Or is the *prosopon* the legal client – the passive shell like creature who sits like a dummy while the advocate sends a verbal message *through* him? (1994, p.18)

The dilemma is presented here is similar to that of Yeats's famous 'Among School Children': 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' (1996, p.231) How is it possible to differentiate between the materiality of language (its sound, inscription), and its significance? Valente's answer is to apostrophise and personify (animalize) language. The meta-poetry of Valente directs language at itself, but at itself personified as animal. Why do this? It is useful to remember that the main thesis Nietzsche defends in *On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense* is the idea that language does not capture lived experience. Poetry, and especially Valente's poetry of origins, desires that the poem, in its breathed form, will retain some connection with lived experience. The idea of recapturing lived experience through memory is an important theme for Valente, evidenced by his use of Bergsonian terminology for a central collection to his production, *Material Memoria (Material Memory)*. If, for Valente, the words of the tribe have lost their value in modernity, becoming 'globos hinchados' (bloated bubbles) (2006, p.149), his desire is that poetry will renovate language, returning it to its primitive relationship with things. Walter Benjamin's discussion of this theme has a special relevance here. In an essay titled 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', he distinguishes between the 'information' of modernity and the traditional 'story':

It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the mark of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand. (1999, p.156)

These remarks are surely pertinent to Valente's poem 'El Cántaro' (The Vase):

El cántaro que tiene la suprema  
realidad de la forma,  
creado de la tierra  
para que el ojo pueda  
contemplar la frescura  
El cántaro que existe conteniendo,  
hueco de contener se quebraría  
inánime. Su forma  
existe sólo así  
sonora y respirada.  
El hondo cántaro  
de clara curvatura,  
bella y servil:  
el cántaro y el canto. (2006, p.134)

[The vase that has the supreme  
reality of the form  
created from the earth  
so that the eye can  
contemplate the freshness  
The vase that exists containing

a lack of containment would break  
inanimate. Its form  
only exists like this  
voiced and breathed,  
The deep vase  
of clear curvature,  
beautiful and servile:  
the vase and the verse. (my translation)]

The poem longs to be, but it can only be in the moment of its enunciation, in its breathed and sounded form. An interesting conflict arises in the desire for shape (a clear curvature which can be given by the printed word) and a desire for breathy corporalization in the voice. The hope is that, in its corporalization, the form of the poem will retain some of the lived experience from which it derives, just as the vase contains the earth from which it is formed.

The tensions within poetry therefore, tensions apparent to poetic intuition, are given ultimate expression in Valente's personification of language, perhaps the 'punto cero' (zero point) of his poetry. Valente names that which for him is the truth of poetry, its indescribable materiality, or the residue of the material which poetry contains and that is unavailable to us in normal rational discourse. It is because poetry tends towards the *irrational* that its personification as animal is apt. To gaze at the animal is to be seduced by what Bataille describes as the 'Poetic fallacy of animality', the idea that the animal can grant us a path towards that which is beyond us – an unmediated experience of the world. Poetry expresses the desire for unmediated experience of the world, which is why it tends towards silence. Animality also seems to offer a path to this experience outside language, which is why (along with silence) it is a preoccupation of Valente. A reading of some of Valente's poems will help clarify the last paragraph.

In a memorable piece from the book *Interior con figuras*, Valente revives the figure of Lazarus so central to his work.

### **Lazarus**

Al final sólo queda  
la voz, la voz, la poderosa voz  
de la llamada:  
-Lázaro  
ven fuera.  
Animal de la noche,  
sierpe, ven, da forma  
a todo lo borrado. (2006, p.340)

### **[Lazarus**

In the end all that remains  
is the voice, the voice, the powerful voice  
of the call:  
-Lazarus,  
come out.  
Animal of the night,  
snake, come, give form,  
to all the unformed. (my translation)]

Lazarus is, like the poet, a liminal figure, existing between darkness and light. He is called by a bare voice, the potential of language, to give form to the nothingness, echoing the claims of poetry for world forming. Lazarus becomes animal, and here there is an interesting paradox. He becomes a serpent, the animal that normally represents knowledge, self-consciousness and the fall from immanence. In the context of the poem however, the serpent can signify animal knowledge, the knowledge of the poet who goes to the limits to experience the indescribable and returns with this knowledge in the form of the poem. The next collection, *Material Memoria*, displays a fascination with the animal. The first words of the collection are ‘Objetos de la noche. / Sombras. / Palabras / con el lomo animal mojado por la dura / transpiración del sueño / o de la muerte’ (‘Objects of the night / Shades / Words / with an animal haunch made wet by the hard / lather of dream / or of death’ – 2006, p.17 – my translation). It is apt here to introduce another, extraordinary, poem from the collection:

### **Las Nubes**

Como un gran pájaro que se abatiera hacia el ocaso  
para beber en él  
la última gota de su propia luz,  
el aire  
hecho forma en las nubes.  
Alas como de oscura transparencia,  
cuerpo no material de una materia  
que sólo hubiese sido  
fuego o respiración en el rastro solar,  
las nubes,  
leve espesor casi animal del aire.  
Como un pájaro roto en muchas alas  
que se precipitasen en la noche  
ebrias sólo de luz,  
las nubes (2006, p.383)

### **[The Clouds**

Like a great bird which descends towards the dawn  
to drink in it  
the last drop of its own light  
the air  
formed in clouds  
Wings as of a dark transparency  
no material body of a material  
which only would have been  
fire or breath in the solar trace  
the clouds.  
almost animal light thickness in the air.  
Like a bird broken into many wings  
which fall in the night  
drunk with light,  
the clouds. (my translation)]

The poem demonstrates the complexity inherent in trying to give corporality to words. The air (language) is formed in clouds (words). But the materiality of the word always disappears in the moment of its apparition, and because of this there is a circular movement, the word is like ‘a great bird which descends towards the sunset/ in order

to drink in it/ the last drop of its own light'. That which is a personification of language as animal in *Material memoria* is developed in *Tres Lecciones de Tinieblas* (Three Lessons on Darkness), a collection based on the Hebraic alphabet which, if we remember Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* (*The Order of Things*), has been posited as the fragmentary remnant of the original Adamic language.

### HE

El latido de un pez en el limo antecede a la vida: branquia, pulmón, burbuja, brote: lo que palpita tiene un ritmo y por el ritmo adviene: recibe y da la vida: el hálito: en lo oscuro el centro es húmedo y de fuego: madre, matriz, materia: stabat matrix: el latido de un pez antecede a la vida: yo descendí contigo a la semilla del respirar: al fondo: bebí tu aliento con mi boca: no bebí lo visible. (2006, p.398)

[The pulsing of a fish in the mire precedes life: Gill, lung, bubble, bud: that which pulses has Rhythm and through rhythm comes: receives and gives life: breath: in darkness the centre is of water and of fire: mother, womb, material: stabat matrix: the pulsing of a fish precedes life: I descended with you to the seed of breath: to the depths: I drank your breath with my mouth: I did not drink the visible. (my translation)]

Here there is a slight change, the poet uses apostrophe – the voice addresses someone: 'I went down with you'. The poet addresses language itself, and attempting to stand outside language, the poet aspires to an experience of a fundamental experience of language not available through rational communication. This experience is available in the realm of the animal which lives, in Bataille's terms, as 'water in water' (in Atterton, 2007, p.35) in the world. The lesson 'Tet' here develops this theme:

### TET

La sangre se hace centro y lo disperso convergencia: todo es reabsorbido desde la piedra al ala hasta el lugar de la generación: las aves vuelan en redondo para indicar el centro de lo cóncavo: el mundo se retrae a ti: porque el vientre ha de ser igual al mundo: engéndrame de nuevo: hazme morir de un nuevo nacimiento: respírame y expúlsame: animal de tus aguas: pez y paloma y sierpe (2006, p.400)

[Blood becomes centre and the disperse convergence: all Is reabsorbed from the stone to the wing to the place of generation: the birds fly in a circle to indicate the centre of the concave: the world retracts to you: because the womb has to be the same as the world: engender me again: kill me with a new birth: breathe and expulse me: animal of your waters: fish and dove and serpent. (my translation)]

Valente aspires in this poem, like the troubadours that Agamben describes, to a rebirth in the originary happening of language as a fundamentally amorous experience. He aspires to experience this rebirth as animal in the moment that fish (earth), dove (air) and serpent (desire/knowledge) are confounded. It is in this moment, according to Valente, when the poet experiences language in its incomprehensible materiality, its

zero point. It is fitting then that Valente's final poem should address the animal materiality of the word:

Cima del canto  
Ruisseñor y tu  
Ya sois lo mismo. (2006, p.582)

[Height of the song  
The nightingale and you  
are now the same. (my translation)]

### Bibliography:

AGAMBEN, G., 2002. *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri [*Lo Abierto: El Hombre y el Animal*. Trans. Antonio Gimeno Cuspinera. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2005]

\_\_\_\_\_, 1995. *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Torino: Einaudi [*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller Roazen. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University, 1998]

\_\_\_\_\_, 1985. *Idea della prosa*. Milano: Feltrinelli [*Idea of Prose*. Trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995]

\_\_\_\_\_, 1996. No Amanece el Cantor. In: *En torno a la Obra de José Ángel Valente*, Amigos de la Residencia de Estudiantes (ed.). Madrid: Alianza, p.47-57

ATTERTON, P. & Calarco, M. (eds.) 2004. *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*. London; New York: Continuum

BENJAMIN, W., 1999. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: Pimlico

DE MAN, P., 1984. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Colombia University Press

FOUCAULT, M., 1994. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*. London: Vintage

\_\_\_\_\_, 1990. *The Will to Knowledge*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin

JIMENEZ HEFFERNAN, J., 1998. *La Palabra emplazada: Meditación y Contemplación de Herbert a Valente*. Córdoba: Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Córdoba

NIETZSCHE, F., 1976. *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking Penguin Inc.

PAXSON, J. J., 1994. *The Poetics of Personification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

VALENTE, J. A., 2006. *Obras Completas*. Vol. 1. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg-Círculo de Lectores

YEATS, W. B., 1996. *The Poems*. Daniel Albright (ed.) London: Dent.

## Ekphrasis in Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*

BEVIN DOYLE

*Dublin City University*

*My Name is Asher Lev*, written in 1972, is the third novel by American-Jewish writer Chaim Potok. Written in the first-person, the novel depicts the childhood and young adulthood of Asher Lev, an artist from an orthodox Jewish background. The adult Lev relates the details of his early life, the conflict between his desire and craving to be an artist, and the demands of his community and family; thus, the novel largely falls into the paradigm of the *Künstlerroman*, the artist's story. The narrative culminates in the creation of a painting, the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*, and in many ways the novel ultimately charts the genesis of this artwork; Lev is narrating a defence of this work.

Born in 1929 in the Bronx into an ultra-orthodox Jewish family, Potok received a Yeshiva education, was an ordained Rabbi and, as an academic, followed both secular and religious paths. Potok's education and community emphasised Talmudic scholarship, and considered the creative arts to be suspect at best. Potok wrote that, within the Jewish tradition as he experienced it, scholarship (especially Talmudic) was held up as the measure of achievement. Fiction, Potok notes '[...] even serious fiction – as far as the religious Jewish tradition is concerned – is at best a frivolity, at worst a menace' (1981, p.163).

It is not surprising, then, that a recurrent, even dominant theme in Potok's fiction is cultural confrontation. Growing up in the Bronx during the 1930s and 40s, and embedded in his conservative Jewish community, Potok describes his growing awareness of the larger world around him, a world 'dark with the spectre of assimilation', yet holding the promise of 'worldly wisdom – the creations of the great minds of man' (1981, p.161). Throughout his early years, he continually experienced what he termed a 'core to core culture confrontation' (*ibid.*, p.166), as he attempted to reconcile the values and heritage of his own culture with those of the surrounding culture – American culture specifically, but more generally, 'the umbrella civilization in which all of us live today, the culture we call western secular humanism' (*ibid.*, p.162).

The character of Asher Lev embodies the 'core to core culture confrontation' that preoccupied Potok. As a Hasidic Jew, Lev's artistic talent and ambitions are irreconcilable with the values of the Ladover Hasidim, the ultra-orthodox Jewish sect to which he and his family belong<sup>1</sup>. Central to the narrative of the *Lev* novel is the battle within Asher Lev himself: religion and family versus art.

In turning towards the life of an artist, Asher turns away from his own community. In the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*, the painting that finally brings acclaim, but also notoriety, he uses a distinctly Christian image, which is highly offensive to his own people. The painting portrays Lev's mother as a crucified person, and also portrays the depth of his own internal and external conflict and struggle.

The novel explores many themes: Western art and culture, orthodox Jewish life in America, father / son conflicts, culture clash. However, the focus here is on the art theme. In a novel centring around the life of a young artist, Potok fittingly employs ekphrasis as a literary device. The intention here is to examine precisely how Potok applies two different types of key ekphrases, and how the employment of those devices contributes to the novel.

### **The Problematic Image**

Potok has stated that his construction of the character of Asher Lev typifies what might happen to a religious Jew who wishes to actively enter the mainstream of Western art (Kauvar, 1986, in Walden, 2001). Lev's story turns on the unsuitability of art as a profession or a pursuit for a practising, orthodox Jew, and within the Lev family, Asher's talent is seen as an almost sinister force. The reasons for this are complex. Elaine Kauvar, in conversation with Potok, mentioned that some of his fictional heroes, such as Lev, grapple with paganism; his reply is pertinent, as it goes to the heart of the problem Lev faces:

An artist deals in images and the Jewish tradition has a very serious problem with images. It's had a serious problem with images from the very beginning, because in the ancient, pagan world, images were intimately connected to modes of worship ... All through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, Jewish law regarded Christendom as essentially an idolatrous civilization. Therefore, Jews did not participate in Western Art. As a result, there are no Jewish motifs in Western Art. (*ibid.*, p.74).

Lev faces two problems: the hostility of the Ladover to visual art in itself, and his need, as an artist, to engage with Western secular culture. It must be noted that there is no lack of an aesthetic sensibility in Judaism, but rather that this has differed from mainstream Western aesthetics throughout history, and the comparative absence of images in Judaic culture (as opposed to the frequent use of images in Christianity) is one of the core differences. While discussing historical perspectives on the image, and what actually constitutes imagery, W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) notes the traditional opposition of orthodox Judaism to material images, due to an association with graven images and idolatry .

In *My Name is Asher Lev* as Pinkser (1985) points out, the Ladover Hasidim are quite liberal in their interpretation of the proscriptive laws concerning 'graven images'<sup>2</sup>. Potok himself points out that Asher Lev is not violating any point of Halakah (the legal part of the Talmud) – technically, he can paint whatever he wants as long as it is not for purposes of worship – but he crosses an aesthetic line (Ribalow, 1976, in Walden, 2001). For Potok, the aesthetics of a culture emanate from its core, and represent the values and *weltanschauung* of its people. Violating a cultural aesthetic is a serious matter for someone who comes from that culture, especially if they also want to remain within it. That Lev appropriates the crucifixion image is (boundlessly) offensive to his own community; from their perspective, the crucifixion is inextricably linked to centuries of persecution.

## Ekphrasis

The term ekphrasis dates back at least to the third century A.D. However, the use of ekphrasis – loosely, a description of visual art in literature – stretches back to the work of Homer; the lengthy description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* is possibly the oldest example of the ekphrastic principle and a frequent starting point for discussions of the term. Despite its age then, it is surprising how infrequently the term is in fact discussed, or rather, as Heffernan (1991) points out, how infrequently it is applied, even when pertinent. Heffernan protests this neglect:

We have no other word for the mode of literature that ekphrasis designates, for a mode of literature whose complexity and vitality – not to mention its astonishing longevity – entitle it to full and widespread recognition (1993, p.2).

It may be useful here, firstly, to foreground the applications of the term. De Armas (2005) outlines various categories of ekphrases in terms of how they are used within a text, and the purpose they serve. Ekphrasis can be notional (based on an imagined artefact or work of art) or actual (where an existing work is used). Ekphrasis may also be combinatory (incorporating two or more works), transformative (where elements of the original work are changed) or fragmented (that is, using only some elements of the work). It can also be metadescriptive, where the ekphrasis used in a text is based on the description of an artwork in a different text. With regard to ekphrasis as a narrative device, it often takes the form of a pause in a narrative to describe the work (descriptive ekphrasis) or the story depicted in a work of art constitutes the narrative itself (narrative ekphrasis). There is also what De Armas calls 'a shaping ekphrasis', where the description is of an art object being created – as in the *Iliad*, with the account of Vulcan forging the shield of Achilles (2005, p.22-23). He also notes that, clearly, a single ekphrastic moment may fall into more than one category. Whichever way the ekphrasis is dealt with in a text, it should ideally serve a rich purpose, either as part of a novel or story, or the constituent part of a poem.

Moving away from categorisation, Heffernan, in two works, explores a more conceptual definition of the ekphrastic principle. Heffernan maintains, after W. J. T Mitchell, that ekphrasis is primarily *paragonal* – that it comprises a struggle for dominance between text and image, feeding into, and in part becoming a locus for, the traditional competition between the 'sister arts' (Heffernan 1991, 1993, Rischin, 1996). The words used in an ekphrastic fragment must evoke the potency and substance of an image, yet control it, in order to serve the needs of the text. The art object must be written *about* in a specific way depending on what those needs are; it must be spoken *to* and *for*, and must be handled in such a way as to establish and curtail its presence. In this way, Heffernan contends, 'Ekphrasis, then, is a literary mode that turns on the antagonism [...] between verbal and visual representation' (1993, p.7).

'Representation' is the key word here. Heffernan proposes that it is this element in the ekphrastic mode that makes it what it is, and that it is through application of the representative quality that we can recognise instances of ekphrasis, and gauge qualities that all ekphrastic literature holds in common. The definition he proposes is, as he notes, simple yet complex: ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation – the implication being that what an instance of ekphrasis represents must itself be representational (*ibid.*).

In *My Name is Asher Lev*, Potok uses both notional and actual ekphrases, and employs elements of the fantastic, through the intense dreams and visions experienced by Lev. Through art, Lev emerges from the intensity of his orthodox Jewish community, and crashes headlong into the surrounding, yet also alien, Western secular culture. Lev must decide between his duty to adhere to his faith and his family's wishes, and his desire to engage fully with Western art and his own talent. Lev is burdened with opposition from his community, and aware of their historical opposition to imagery. So, where do Lev's allegiances really lie? Potok answers this through the central ekphrastic element, namely, Lev's painting, the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*.

### **Ekphrasis in *My Name is Asher Lev***

If we apply the categories proposed by De Armas (as mentioned above), Potok seems to employ ekphrases with overlapping purposes, but in fact primarily uses, in combination or singly, three forms of ekphrases – a shaping ekphrasis, an actual or true ekphrasis, and a notional ekphrasis. We also find collectionist ekphrases in the novel. However, the emphasis here is on the shaping, notional ekphrasis, the reason being that what we are most often shown in the narrative is Lev engaging in the creative process.

Throughout *My Name is Asher Lev* the ekphrases which depict Lev creating his work trace his development as an artist and as a person, yielding psychological insight. Lev innately and unconsciously views the world with a painter's eye from his early years, and gives form to his fears and dreams in pictures<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the course of the novel, his developing art is indivisible from his developing character as he grows into young adulthood. The artworks reflect Lev's and his family's life, and shape the entire story arc of the novel. Potok's style is intensely visual, and the text is packed with ekphrastic scenes. However, I will focus on two key ekphrases, which best illustrate Potok's use of this device.

By the time he enters adolescence, Asher Lev's talent has caused huge problems within his family. In the face of growing hostility between father and son, the Rebbe of the Ladover group intervenes. Hoping that the boy's gift can be channelled in some way that would be beneficial and acceptable to all, the Rebbe arranges for Asher to study with Jacob Kahn, a famous and important painter and sculptor. As Asher's father, Aryeh, is absented, both physically and emotionally, from his son's life, Kahn becomes akin to a surrogate father to Asher. Kahn is Jewish by birth, but he is thoroughly of, and engrossed in, the world of Western art, and provides all the information, technical, historical and textual, that Asher needs. Kahn also understands the nature of Asher's faith, but makes it clear that this cannot be allowed to interfere with his growth as an artist. The Rebbe had indicated his wish that Asher be taught everything, but that he should not paint nudes. Kahn disregards this completely and employs a life model for Asher to sketch. Now in mid-adolescence, the boy is highly embarrassed and uncomfortable, but he agrees to try. His first drawing is a disaster, but his shame at being in the presence of a naked girl is outweighed by his shame at producing an inferior work (*My Name is Asher Lev*, p.220). He begins again:

The girl sat very still, bathed in sunlight. I looked at her and worked carefully, translating her body into lines, making choices, each curve, each subtle change in the flow of her flesh, necessitating an interpreting choice of line. (MNAL 220)

The use of language is effective here; we are presented with the girl poised as though already a picture, then the subsequent phrasing produces an impression of the act of drawing, as Asher 'translates' her into lines. This act of interpreting a naked body into an artwork is a sea-change for this character. Asher is now learning to work purely in terms of aesthetics, not letting personal feelings or his faith dictate what he will attempt.

Asher is convinced to attempt this drawing in the first place by Kahn's persuasive argument:

The human body is a glory of structure and form. When an artist draws or paints or sculpts it, he is a battleground between intelligence and emotion, between his rational side and his sensual side. You do understand that. Yes, I see you do. The manner in which certain artists have resolved that battle has created some of the greatest masterpieces of art. You must learn to understand this battle. (MNAL 219)

This preceding statement gives depth to the descriptions of Asher drawing the girl – she represents a core element of Western art. However, the boy did have a choice. Kahn tells him of the Rebbe's request and essentially, he is choosing whom he values more highly: Kahn or the Rebbe. By choosing to sketch the girl, Asher is finally aligning himself with art over anything else in his life. In many ways, he has already crossed the aesthetic line which Potok spoke of, as represented by the naked girl.

As the novel progresses towards the creation of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings, Asher develops as an artist and has his first, highly successful, exhibition of work in New York. Now in his early twenties, Asher travels to Europe, truly alone, adult and autonomous for the first time in his life. The account of his time in Italy and France constitutes an extended ekphrastic sequence, in that Potok shows us not just the actual creation of both paintings, but also the period of their gestation in Asher's mind. It is only when Asher journeys to Europe, the source of Western secular values and art, that he is able, through a series of experiences to fully evolve as an artist, and reach maturity in himself.

In Florence, he is stunned by Michelangelo's *Pietà*<sup>4</sup> in the *Duomo*: 'I stared at the geometry of the stone and felt the stone luminous with strange suffering and sorrow. I was an observant Jew, yet that block of stone moved through me like a cry' (MNAL 295). In a square outside the *Duomo* he watches and sketches a man standing with his arms outstretched, pigeons flocking to him, resting on his arms and pecking birdseed from his hands. He draws the old Jewish woman who keeps the lodgings he rooms in, first as she is, then looking younger, a sketch that has a vague resemblance to his mother. Repeatedly viewing and drawing Michelangelo's *David*, he ponders the effect its creation had: the 'spatial and temporal shift that had changed the course of art' (MNAL 297). Michelangelo created a statue of David, powerful and vast, a work of technical virtuosity, depicting him prior to his battle with Goliath. His predecessors created smaller, post-battle figures. The 'spatial and temporal shift' was the re-interpretation, the reconfiguration, both technical and conceptual, of an accepted mode.

Distance from home allows for a deeper understanding of all that his parents are, the sorrow and anguish they have both suffered, the weight of centuries of inherited tradition on their shoulders. Thinking about his family, his ancestors, his own past, Asher reaches his own conclusions and repeatedly says: 'I did not know. But I sensed it as truth' (MNAL 307-309). His perspectives, his version of events are

sensed as a truth that will be transferred onto canvas. The young adult has gained understanding and insight, which the young artist demands to appropriate. Potok deftly charts the character's half-conscious appropriation of recent and past experiences; two pivotal works of Western art, one a Judaic hero, the other the depiction of an iconic Christian scene, two ordinary people (the old man, the old Jewish woman) and Asher's own past are distilled into the paintings *Brooklyn Crucifixion 1* and *Brooklyn Crucifixion 2*.

Asher Lev avoids beginning work on what is now, for him, inevitable, but eventually creates the paintings. Potok, in interview, said that he underwent the same process as he considered the final artistic statement of the novel:

I wrote the book and kept living it as I was writing it. It was the strangest kind of experience because I kept saying to myself, 'There's going to be another way out of it'. And I kept checking with people – what would you do? What would you do? What would you do? (Ribalow, p.21)

Potok went on to report that he was shocked at the realisation that he could find no other image to use, that no other aesthetic mould was available that would serve what he wanted his character to depict: 'There is no other form in Western art other than the Crucifixion that a Jew can use to depict ultimate, solitary suffering? There has to be! Well, there isn't.' (*ibid.*). Potok could not find any other answer, thus neither can his hero. It seems that the answers of Potok and his fictional creation could be interchangeable. In the novel, Asher declares: 'I knew there would be no other way to do it. No one says you have to paint ultimate anguish and torment. But if you are driven to paint it, you have no other way' (*MNAL* 310).

Asher Lev creates the first painting, his mother standing behind the window of their Brooklyn apartment, looking through the window, her arms resting on the window frame in a crucifixion pose. From the description, the reader can judge that the image is naturalistic and the intensity restrained. However, her eyes are 'directly behind the vertical line but burning through it' (*MNAL* 311). Furthermore, Lev adds the suggestion of crosses by depicting 'the houses of our street and the slanting lines of the blind and the verticals and horizontals of near and distant telephone poles' (*MNAL* 311). Nevertheless, it seems incomplete, and can only be completed by the creation of a second painting: 'Yes, I could have decided not to do it. Who would have known?' (*MNAL* 312). Potok's description of the creation of the second work is worth quoting at length:

With charcoal, I drew the frame of the living-room window of our Brooklyn apartment. I drew the strip of wood that divided the window and the slanting bottom of the Venetian blind a few inches from the top of the window. On top – not behind this time, but on top – of the window I drew my mother in her housecoat, with her arms extended along the horizontal of the blind, her wrists tied to it with the cords of the blind, her legs tied at the ankles to the vertical of the inner frame with another section of the cord of the blind. I arched her body and twisted her head. I drew my father standing to her right, dressed in a hat and coat and carrying an attaché case. I drew myself standing to her left, dressed in paint-spattered clothes and a fisherman's cap and holding a palette and a long spear-like brush. I exaggerated the size of the palette and balanced it by exaggerating the size of my father's attaché case. We were looking at my mother and at each other. I split my mother's head into balanced segments, one looking at me, one looking at my father, one looking upward. The torment, the tearing anguish I felt in her, I put into her mouth, into the twisting curve of her head, the

arching of her slight body, the clenching of her small fists, the taut downward pointing of her thin legs. I sprayed fixative on the charcoal and began to put on the colours. [...] I painted swiftly in a strange nerveless frenzy of energy. For all the pain you suffered my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. For the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other's throats... (MNAL 313).

In keeping with Potok's general style, the language used is plain, stripped down and precise. The careful, step-by-step description allows the reader to visualise the creation of what seems to be quite a complex painting. Twinned with the account of the prior work, we are shown Asher's mother, Rivkeh, in what her son proposes to be her emotional state during her window vigils, waiting for her husband or her son to come home, and the conflicts and compromises that have governed her life. This representation is the real picture, the true portrayal, which was merely suggested in the first painting. The description of her body and face is recognisably that of the crucified form. Potok also conveys Asher's almost ruthless pursuit of this true depiction. Apart from the agony he infuses into the figure of his mother, the position of the figures of himself and his father, in their recognisable garb, obviously implicate them as the sources of her, now externalised, internal struggle. That this is an internal struggle, within Rivkeh and around her within her family, is further emphasised by Asher painting her in her housecoat – a garment she would never wear outside of her own household, something the reader can discern by other descriptions of Rivkeh in the text. Potok, having directed his hero to paint this more true, more complete, work will not allow him to pull his punches. The contrast with the first painting also provides a sense of movement of the presented figure of Rivkeh, from standing behind the window to being suspended upon it. Likewise, the intensity of the lengthy, meticulous, passage very much approximate the sense of Lev painting in his 'strange, nerveless frenzy' and the emotions he experiences.

Potok provides the reader with a clear picture of both the finished work, its creation, and the mind of its creator. The painting embodies everything we have been told, the individual story of the principal character and the universal elements therein. The use of the crucifixion image by Asher Lev seems antithetical to everything that he, as a religious Jew, would stand for. Yet, arguably the spectre of anti-Semitism is raised by his appropriation of it. The crucifixion, for Jews, is iconic of the deicide charge laid at the feet of Jews by Christians throughout the ages, the excuse for so much persecution. For these two faiths, it is a divisive image. There is also the question of its ubiquity in Western art. Had the crucifixion not become such an elemental, archetypal image in Western art, the possibility is that another, more universal image to represent suffering would have been generated; as indicated by Potok's comments above, the very inevitability of the image speaks volumes, about Western culture, Judaism itself and the history of Jewish persecution. In addition, that the crucifixion should prove so problematic for Lev as a Jew, yet so unavoidable for Lev the artist, reflects the character's own internal struggle.

In the context of ekphrasis, the painting is a formidable example of the mode. The painting encapsulates the entire history of Asher Lev's life to date and the entire narrative of the novel. The painting is a constant presence, which is introduced to the reader on the first page, as Lev introduces himself; he and the painting are inextricably linked. Thus, while it is a notional, shaping ekphrasis, it is far more so a narrative ekphrasis. However, to take that idea further, it is proposed here that *My Name is Asher Lev* constitutes an ekphrastic novel. The painting contains the key

thematic elements. The narrative is both constructed around, and derives from the painting, and (in another application of an ekphrasis type) the creation of the painting and its display serve as a dramatic climax. Furthermore, the painting makes explicit that which is implicit within the narrative. Lev, the narrator, expresses through the painting what he cannot say.

Potok also moved beyond ekphrasis. In interviews, the author made it clear that *My Name is Asher Lev* was somewhat autobiographical. As a young man, his interest in painting became such a problem within his family that, for a long time, he gave it up, and turned to writing. This too caused problems within his family and community when he became a published author, and it appears that he was deeply acquainted with the choices an artist is forced to make. In addition, as indicated above, (and to paraphrase) he lived the novel as he wrote it, and obviously struggled with his own use of the crucifixion image. It seems that this had resonance for him beyond the composition of the novel; Potok subsequently painted his own version of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*, creating an actual painting from his own notional ekphrasis.

*My Name is Asher Lev* is a novel which is deeply, and perhaps primarily, concerned with questions of aesthetics. The central character lives a life which is defined by his artistic development. Of Lev, one could say that he progresses from a naive, nascent talent to technical and conceptual mastery in the same way that he progresses from childhood to adulthood; for him, these journeys are parallel and indivisible. All other themes dealt with in the novel – such as culture confrontations, father / son conflicts, religious faith, anti-Semitism – are all filtered through a primary concern with aesthetics and aesthetic difference. Potok's painter's eye ensures a richness of imagery, and his often sparse style complements the ekphrastic mode, examples of which are plentiful throughout the text. The ekphrases examined here are 'shaping' ekphrases, a term which, with reference to this novel, can acquire a dual meaning – these ekphrastic scenes not only depict the creation of an artwork, but are pivotal moments in the narrative and give 'shape' to Lev as a fictional creation and as an artist. Due to the centrality of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*, it is arguable that the book moves beyond a 'narrative ekphrasis' and is essentially an ekphrastic novel. The narrative and its larger themes are all shaped in the context of the central artwork; Lev's own story and his painting are inseparable.

### Bibliography:

De ARMAS, F. A., 2005 (Ed.). *Ekphrasis in the Age of Cervantes*. New Jersey: Rosemont

HEFFERNAN, J. A. W., 1991. Ekphrasis and Representation. *New Literary History* vol. 22, no.2, p. 297-316. [Online]. Available from:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00286087%28199121%2922%3A2%3C297%3AEAR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5> [Accessed April 2007]

\_\_\_\_\_, 1993. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

KAUVAR, E. M., 1986. An Interview with Chaim Potok. *In: Walden, D., 2001 (ed.) Conversations with Chaim Potok.* Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, p.63-87

KREMER, S. L., 1981. An Interview with Chaim Potok. *In: Walden, D., 2001 (ed.) Conversations with Chaim Potok.* Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, p.31-45

MITCHELL, W. J. T., 1986. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

\_\_\_\_\_, 1987. Going Too Far with the Sister Arts. *In: Heffernan, J. A. W. (ed.), Space, Time, Image, Sign: Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts.* New York: Peter Lang, p.1-9

POTOK, C., 1972. *My Name is Asher Lev.* New York: Fawcett Crest

\_\_\_\_\_, 1981. Culture Confrontation in Urban America: A Writer's Beginnings. *In: Jaye, M. C., and Watts, A. C., Literature and the American Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.161-167

PINSKER, S., 1985. The Crucifixion of Chaim Potok / The Excommunication of Asher Lev: Art and the Hasidic World. *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, vol. 4, p.39-51

RIBALOW, H., 1976. A Conversation with Chaim Potok. *In: Walden, D., 2001 (ed.) Conversations with Chaim Potok.* Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press. p.1-27.

### Notes:

- 1 The Ladover Hasidim are based, by Potok's own admission, on the Lubavitcher Hasidim; even without his admission, according to Pinsker (1985) the similarities are obvious to those familiar with the Lubavitch (or CHABAD) Movement.
- 2 This, Pinsker maintains, is the case with the real Hasidic group on which they are based; the Lubavitcher Hasidim (*op. cit.*).
- 3 As did Potok, by his own admission. In interview with Elaine Kauvar, he noted 'yes, the imagery may very well come from the fact that I do see the world the way a painter does' (Kauvar, *op. cit.* p.68).
- 4 The statue, called the *Florentine Pietá* or *The Deposition*, depicts three figures cradling the body of Christ. A male figure thought to represent Nicodemus stands upright behind the body, which is held on either side by two female figures, one thought to be Mary Magdalene. (The statue is held in the museum of the Cathedral (the *Duomo*) in Florence.)

# Uses of the Carnavalesque in Pádraic Ó Conaire and Franz Kafka

ZARA BLAKE  
*Trinity College Dublin*

‘I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men.’ (Goethe, 1827)<sup>1</sup>

The study of comparative literature, it may be argued, is rooted in the idea that literature is an aspect common to all cultures and civilisations. The above quote from Goethe acknowledges as much and is highly favourable and reassuring for those concerned with the study of comparative literature, as it justifies the study of one text in parallel with another based on the view that literature is something to be shared across nations. However, the study of comparative literature and the valuation of its worth is in a state of perpetual debate. Critics and literary commentators argue over its advantages, while others dismiss the discipline’s place in the twentieth century, believing that the practice is obsolete and dated.<sup>2</sup> What exactly is encompassed in the discipline is also disputed, thus ensuring that an exact, universal definition and understanding of comparative literature is elusive and evaded.

Bearing in mind Goethe’s forward-thinking outlook, these apparent shortcomings may be interpreted conversely; the various, loose interpretations of the study of comparative literature may, perhaps, be liberating.<sup>3</sup> Recent publications on the subject, such as Haun Saussy’s, have revelled in the indistinguishable nature of comparative literature, maintaining that the discipline allows for literatures to be ‘surveyed’ next to each other. Saussy’s views offer some comfort to those who may grapple with the lacking definitiveness of comparative literature. His belief in the far-reaching possibilities of the field is particularly inspiring to the comparative study of very different authors. However, a methodological approach, of some sort, is necessary in order to construct a fruitful comparison that yields interesting results.

In *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek offers an alternative theoretical and methodological framework for comparative literature; one based upon the principle that

... the discipline of Comparative Literature is *in toto* a method in the study of literature in at least two ways. First, Comparative Literature meant the knowledge of more than one national language and literature and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature and, second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various types of texts, etc. (1998, p.13)

Tötösy de Zepetnek's offering is, certainly, open to interpretation, yet it provides a useful and practical framework for those wishing to draw comparisons as it allows for the incorporation of various other disciplines. Tötösy de Zepetnek also notes that another crucial principle of the practice 'is the theoretical as well as methodological postulate to move and to dialogue between cultures, languages, literatures and disciplines.' (*ibid.*) All those principles outlined by Tötösy de Zepetnek are helpful to the construction of a comparative study of two, outwardly at least, very different authors, such as the comparison proposed here between Pádraic Ó Conaire and Franz Kafka – one of the principal aims of the comparative exercise being to successfully link cultures and artists apparently distant from one another.<sup>4</sup>

Not confined to specific literary and cultural domains, comparative literature can thus facilitate the discovery of new literary perspectives and interpretations. There only remains to decide on a critical framework. In this study, after a brief examination of Ó Conaire and Kafka's backgrounds, influences and political leanings, as mirrored in their texts, I would like to argue that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque forms a viable premise for comparison between the two authors. I therefore propose to demonstrate how drawing thematic and stylistic similarities (including linguistic considerations) between Pádraic Ó Conaire's *Deoraíocht* (*Diaspora*) and Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (*Metamorphosis*) can provide readers and critics with a valuable illustration of comparative possibilities.

Despite coming from hugely different backgrounds – the country life of Connemara for one, and city life in Prague for the other – Pádraic Ó Conaire and Franz Kafka experienced similar personal, social and cultural circumstances. I intend to examine those briefly before drawing further critical parallels between *Deoraíocht* (a novel first published in 1910) and *Die Verwandlung* (a novella first published in 1915).

Pádraic Ó Conaire was born towards the end of the nineteenth century, in 1882. Franz Kafka, just a year later. Both men were born in countries occupied by a sovereign power. Ireland was then controlled by Britain and, what we now refer to as the Czech Republic, by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The turbulent histories of Ireland and the Czech Republic share many similarities regarding the social and political environments in which Ó Conaire and Kafka grew up and, consequently, allow for biographical comparisons to be made. As a result of the occupation of Ireland and the Czech Republic, both writers' cultural experiences are strikingly similar. Ó Conaire grew up in Connemara, the largest Gaeltacht region in Ireland, yet was reared through English, and Kafka, who was raised in Prague, Bohemia, was educated through German. The bilingual capacity of both Ó Conaire and Kafka is reflective of their respective homelands, as both countries were culturally divided. In Ireland and the Czech Republic, a sub-culture existed in rural regions where indigenous traditions and the, once, national languages thrived. The repression of these cultures may explain the carnivalesque invasions that mar the orthodox social structures found in *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung*. Despite their efforts, neither writer was ever wholly engaged with any one society (that is, Anglo-Irish, British, Austro-Hungarian or Czech). They existed on the periphery.

Another element of biographical comparison between Ó Conaire and Kafka is the influence of the paternal presence in their lives. Shortly after Ó Conaire's birth, his father abandoned his family and left for America where he died a few years later. This painful episode had even worse consequences for Ó Conaire and his brothers

when their mother died in 1893 – Pádraic was then eleven years old. The boys were left in the care of their uncle. These autobiographical details are found in *Deoraíocht*, in which we find no mention of Mícheál's father, while we learn from the narrator's uncle that his mother is dead. While Kafka's situation was largely different, in that his father remained a dedicated provider for the family, the father-son relationship was a rather strained and tenuous one. Kafka acknowledged as much in a letter to his father in which he wrote:

Liebster Vater,

Du hast mich letztthin einmal gefragt, warum ich behaupte, ich hätte Furcht vor Dir. Ich wusste Dir, wie gewöhnlich, nichts zu antworten, zum Teil eben aus der Furcht, die ich vor Dir habe, zum Teil deshalb, weil zur Begründung dieser Furcht zu viele Einzelheiten gehören, als dass ich sie im Reden halbwegs zusammenhalten könnte.

[Dearest Father,

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. (Kafka, 1966, p.7)]

In light of this correspondence, the tentative relationship between Kafka's protagonist, Gregor Samsa and his father may be also seen as an autobiographical reference. In any case, the biographical similarities between the writers enable us to consider their works in a new light. The struggles of the protagonists in each text may covertly relate to Ó Conaire and Kafka's own experiences as marginal characters. The analogous elements identified in their backgrounds represent an important first step toward the comparative link that one may draw between their works.

Having briefly considered the authors' personal histories, we may now turn to the textual similarities that abound between *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung*. Amongst them, I would like to focus on the dramatic and permanent transformations the protagonists undergo from the opening paragraphs of each text. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque seems a particularly relevant theory to apply here. Carnival images and motifs are indeed numerous throughout both works and allow the authors to subversively comment upon the societies to which neither truly ever belonged. A carnival atmosphere, according to Bakhtin, enables authors and their characters to defy the accepted order and create a new, subversive existence, through humour and chaos. The changes experienced by Mícheál Ó Maoláin in *Deoraíocht* and Gregor Samsa in *Die Verwandlung* are not only physical, but psychological and emotional, too. The altered state of each character is a useful literary device through which Ó Conaire and Kafka explore and account for the experiences of an individual occupying a social no man's land.

In *Deoraíocht*, Mícheál Ó Maoláin is knocked down by a car in the opening scene. He loses one of his legs and damages his arm as a result. The immediate change in Mícheál's physical appearance is typical of another Bakhtinian notion, related to the carnivalesque, that of the grotesque body. Mícheál's body is transformed from the 'classic image of man' into something more incomplete; he is deformed. Mícheál's reaction to his accident is ultimately tragic. He becomes

obsessed with it. Rather than accept his lot and attempt to address his disability, he chooses to compare himself and others to animals. He then begins dehumanising himself, as illustrated throughout the novel. We witness Mícheál screaming, wailing and growling at people in an attempt to scare them. He sees himself as a monster and even goes so far as to join a ‘taispeántas iontas agus uafás agus beithíocht allta’ (‘an exhibition of wonder, horror and wild animals’, *D*, p.21, my translation). Mícheál becomes further and further engrossed in animal behaviour and, identifying with some sort of a hybrid, he progressively abandons the confines of human behaviour. This is evident when the narrator recalls: ‘Ní dhearnas ach mo thenaga a chur amach leis, agus torann gránna a dhéanamh le me bhéal.’ (‘I let off a great, ugly, horrific noise from my mouth’, *D*, p.30, my translation). He, essentially, brays. This image of Mícheál as man and beast is truly carnivalesque and corresponds to Bakhtin’s view: ‘The unfinished and open body is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects.’ (1984, p.26-27)

To take this animalisation of Mícheál even further, we may consider him akin to Agamben’s wolf-man, as a character on the threshold ‘of indistinction and of passage between animal and man’ (2001, p.105). As mentioned before, Mícheál’s transformation is not only physical, but emotional and psychological too, and his personality rapidly becomes ugly and embittered as a result. Mícheál’s jealous hatred for others alienates him and thus forces him into a depressed solitude that is rarely relieved in the narrative. He also adopts the persona of a murderous sword-wielding German madman, accounting for his lost limbs through battle. Mícheál’s newly acquired personality is yet another manifestation of his physical and psychological alteration, revealing a dangerous recklessness. His transformation, body and mind, may be considered as a carnivalesque motif as his animalistic behaviour frequently impinges upon his view of life. Not only does he regard himself as beastly, but he considers others in this light, too. This is seen to be true when he compares men standing outside a pub to ‘na creabhair a bhíos ag súgadh fola na gcapal agus na mbó’ (‘the horseflies that suck the blood from horses and cows’, *D*, p.73, my translation) and this grotesque image is similar to the change that comes over the human body in *Die Verwandlung*.

The opening paragraph of Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*, like that of *Deoraíocht*, is concerned with a transformation of the grotesque kind. While Mícheál’s outlook and actions, more so than the actual loss of his limbs, provided Ó Conaire’s text with a carnival atmosphere, Gregor Samsa’s physical change plunges the reader into a subversive world. Waking one morning to find himself transformed into a giant beetle, Gregor’s world is suddenly disrupted and he never returns to being ‘normal’. The image of a giant beetle occupying an apartment in Prague with his horrified family held captive is truly carnivalesque as well as grotesque. Kafka’s portrayal of the mutated Gregor depicts a body even further removed from the classical images of man than Ó Conaire’s of his own protagonist. At the end of the very first paragraph of the novella, we are already dealing with an insect-like creature: ‘Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen’ (‘His numerous legs, pathetically frail by contrast to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes’, *M*, p.87). The image is reminiscent of Mícheál’s ineffective limbs, and this resemblance represents another comparison between the two authors. Because of the immense physical change, Gregor is immediately cut off from the life he once led, resulting in complete disruption for both

him and his family. He is unable to go to work or move as he once could. His speech, too, is stifled and he is rendered silent. This is yet another element of his transformation from man to beast. Kafka emphasises the grotesque as he describes: 'die Ballen seine Beinchen hatten ein wenig Klebstoff [...], ein braune Flüssigkeit kahl ihm aus dem Mund [...] und tropfte auf den Boden' ('the pads on his little legs secreted some sort of sticky substance [...], a brown liquid came from his mouth [...] and dribbled on to the floor', *M*, p.98). Gregor's animal appearance is quite disturbing to the family and they react accordingly. His sister uses rags when feeding him, or when handling anything in the bedroom. Although she continues to look after him, she is unable to overcome the repulsion he inspires: '... ihr sein Anblick noch immer unerträglich war und ihr auch weiterhin unerträglich bleiben müsse' ('the sight of him was still unbearable to her and would continue to be unbearable to her', *M*, p.116). Undoubtedly, Gregor's gross transformation, coupled with an unblinking and grotesque account of bodily functions, ensures that Bakhtinian ideas of the carnival prevail throughout the text.

As was the case with *Deoraíocht*, the central figure of *Die Verwandlung* undergoes a psychological and emotional transformation that is in stark opposition to the system according to which the family continues to live. This is not helped by Gregor's progressive loss of speaking abilities. His incapacity for verbal communication makes him completely vulnerable to those around him and this, understandably, frustrates and infuriates him at times. For a short while in the novella, Gregor is understood, albeit barely, by his family and Chief Clerk. He thus continues to be perceived as a man, while already depicted as an animal. As with Ó Conaire's character, Agamben's wolf-man comes to mind. The male character's faculty for speech, though waning, is his remaining claim to humanity. As he loses this ability, his beastly tendencies overcome his human nature, so much so that his dietary needs change, as do other needs, and his memory begins to fade. This much is evident when Gregor's mother and sister decide that the furnishings in his room are obsolete. Gregor's debating of this notion highlights that the room and its components are one of the final links to the life he once led:

Hatte er wirklich Lust, das warme, mit ererbten Möbeln gemütlich ausgestattete Zimmer in eine Höhle verwandeln zu lassen, in der er dann freilich nach allen Richtungen ungestört würde kriechen können, jedoch auch unter gleichzeitigem, schnellen, gänzlichen Vergessen seiner menschlichen Vergangenheit? War er doch jetzt schon nahe daran, zu vergessen, und nur die seit langem nicht gehörte Stimme der Mutter hatte ihn aufgerüttelt.

[Was it really his wish to have his cosy room, comfortably furnished with old heirlooms, transformed into a sort of cave, merely so that he would be able to crawl around it freely, without hindrance in any direction – even at the expense of rapidly and utterly forgetting his human past? He was near enough to forgetting it now, and only the voice of his mother, which he hadn't heard for a long while, had reawakened the memory in him. (*M*, p.119-120)]

Regardless of his musings thereafter, in the family's eyes, Gregor's transformation is utterly complete and he is no longer a human being. The removal of his personal items illustrates this, as does the use of his room as a dumping ground for the family's unwanted belongings, later in the text.

Let us now turn to the perspective which carnival-grotesque elements offer in terms of deepening our comparison between *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung*. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the benefits of this literary mode:

In all these writings, in spite of their differences in character and tendency, the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. (1984, p.34)

If we apply this concept to our analysis of Ó Conaire and Kafka's texts, and if we consider the type of characters they created, we can then interpret their respective fictional worlds as truly subversive. Let us examine Gregor first. As an animal, he is freed of the responsibilities and restrictions once placed upon him. This freedom, however, has an adverse effect on the finances of his family. The Samsas indeed become financially burdened by Gregor's grotesque form; they no longer have the financial support of their hard-working son. As the situation plunges the family into disarray and despair, further carnivalesque elements are introduced in the text, which impinge directly upon the Samsas' conventional way of life. For instance, Gregor's metamorphosis upsets his father's demeanour and even his humanity, to the point where he charges at his son. Mr Samsa is transformed from a man whose main concern was the occupation of his rocking-chair to a resolved, murderous madman. Those elements, by their unrelenting presence in the novella, slowly destroy the accepted order of life, until Gregor finally perishes, releasing the family from the grips of a carnivalesque existence. However, before Gregor's death, (his grotesque body shrivels up and hardens) the family have been forced to completely abandon their old system of existence.

In Ó Conaire's text, too, the social order has been disturbed. Mícheál frequently disassociates himself from society, particularly when he voices his jealous hatred for those more able-bodied than himself. For him, people normally built are his main opponents. They incite rage and paranoia within the disillusioned protagonist, and he desires to destroy them, to make them like him with a belt of his 'maide croise' (crutch)! He is also at odds with the city of London itself. He describes it in terms of an all-seeing monster, another entity with which he must exist in opposition. This is evident in the line 'an ollphiast úd a bhfuil na mílte míle solus, na mílte míle súil' ('the monster with thousands of lights and thousands of eyes').

An Fear Beag Buí's 'taispáintas' (the exhibition of the Small Yellow Man) provides Mícheál with an ideal opportunity to escape his oppressors; that is those who are able bodied and participating members of society. Those in the 'taispáintas' – essentially, a freak show – provide an ideal community for Mícheál. His physical difference from the classical, bodily ideal is no longer strikingly different amongst an Fear Beag Buí's company. However, this, too, in Mícheál's eyes, becomes another, albeit bizarre, social order. As a form of attraction, he experiences both moments of bliss and unmitigated rage. Being a truly carnivalesque composition, Mícheál ultimately succeeds in destroying this 'accepted order' and financially ruins the Fear Beag Buí when he exposes the falsities of the exhibition. In his dastardly efforts, he even manages to mock the sanctity of marriage by promising to marry 'an Bean Ramhar' (the fat woman) in an attempt to aggravate the exhibition owner. This event, itself, is wrought with carnival elements and their distinctive sense of humour.

The grotesque body in a literary text creates a figure of unruly biological and social nature. It ridicules the accepted world order. The body in opposition to officialdom bears the undeniable mark of carnival and aids an author in his or her attempts to defy the system in place. In both *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung*, all notions associated with the image of the classical body are abandoned, as Ó Conaire and Kafka, respectively, submerge their characters in a dark form of existence. The carnival transformations that overcome Mícheál in *Deoraíocht* and Gregor in *Die Verwandlung* are multifaceted. The changes that occur redefine the characters and force them into an unknown space. Both Mícheál and Gregor are disabled by their newly transformed bodies. They become physically restrained by their new forms and are even rendered speechless. The resulting unwelcomed carnivalesque intrusions that spill forth onto the pages of *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung* hint to more deep-rooted dissatisfactions experienced by the authors. *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung* are, undoubtedly, fine examples of carnival literature, and they exhibit the endless artistic possibilities associated with the genre. Carnivalesque intrusion within a text provides an author with ample opportunity to comment subversively upon the accepted order that has been disturbed. The trappings of the genre, as outlined extensively by Bakhtin, enable an author to reduce seemingly unshakable versions of officialdom to chaotic ruins through a process of disintegration that envelops the entire world of a text and its characters. As evident in the works of Kafka and Ó Conaire, the carnival elements of *Die Verwandlung* and *Deoraíocht*, respectively, allow for greater artistic expression and experimentation within two minor literatures. When we consider the carnival aspects of our studied works alongside other texts, we may even find that the grotesque intrusions that persist in *Deoraíocht* and *Die Verwandlung* hint to the cultural anxieties faced by an author exiled in his own land, by his own people. Perhaps Mícheál and Gregor could be read as frightful manifestations of these insecurities.

### Bibliography:

AGAMBEN, G., 2001. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Heller-Roazen, D., Stanford: Stanford University Press

BAKHTIN, M., 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

BASSNETT, S., 1993. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell

DAMROSCH, D., 2003. *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press

KAFKA, F., 2007. *Die Verwandlung*. [www.gutenberg.org/files/22367/22367-8.txt](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22367/22367-8.txt) [Accessed 20/11/2009]. Trans. by Michael Hofmann, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, London: Penguin, 2007

\_\_\_\_\_, 1966, *Brief an den Vater / Letter to His Father*, Bilingual Edition, New York, Schocken Books

Ó CONAIRE, P., 1994. *Deoraíocht*. Dublin: an Comhlacht Oideachais.

Saussy, Haun, 'Comparative Literature?', *PMLA*, Volume 118, Number 2, Mar 2003, p.336–341

TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK, S., 1998. *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, Amsterdam: Rodopi

### Notes:

- 1 In David Damrosch, 'Goethe Coins a Phrase', *What is World Literature?*, Princeton University Press, 2003.
- 2 In *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Susan Bassnett suggests that the practice of comparative literature has become obsolete and that attentions should now be focused upon literary translation.
- 3 In his article entitled 'Comparative Literature?' Haun Saussy gives a brief outline of his experience of the discipline from the 1970s to the present day. He notes a substantial shift in the manner in which comparative literature was interpreted then and how the discipline is treated today, and states that 'the three-language rule identified the discipline as something apart from English, national language studies or studies of literature in translation' (*PMLA*, p.336) – which, he feels, 'all made for a fragile discipline' (*PMLA*, p.337).
- 4 As noted by Henry Remark, 'Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country' (*CL:ACI*, p.31).

## Notes on contributors

Mila Milani is a graduate of the Faculty of Languages and Literature, University of Bologna (2006), where she also recently completed her Master in Comparative Literature on 'Cesare Pavese's translation of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* during Fascism'. She has published two articles in the Italian literary journal *Poetiche*, one on the relationship between Soffici and Apollinaire and one on Cesare Pavese's translation of James Joyce. Her research interests focus on Translation Studies and the relationship between publishing institutions and the practice of translation, twentieth-century Italian literature and poetry, Comparative Literature (in particular the influence of contemporary French and English literatures on Italian writers) and twentieth-century vanguards. Her doctoral research in Italian Studies, which she is now pursuing at the University of Manchester, is funded by the AHRC.

Marion Dalvai holds a BA in Foreign Languages and Literatures from the University of Trento (Italy) and an MPhil in Comparative Literature from Trinity College, Dublin, where she is currently a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature on the *Texts Contexts Cultures* programme. Her PhD dissertation in comparative reception studies is entitled *Politics of cross-cultural interpretation* and investigates reception processes across cultures and ages.

Patrick Howard is a graduate and postgraduate of Trinity College, Dublin. He completed his M.Phil in Comparative Literature in 2007. His dissertation was on 'Dante's *Commedia* as a Reading of Pasolini's *La Divina Mimesis*'.

Patricia Garcia holds a BA in Translation and Interpreting (English-German-Spanish) from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and an MA in Comparative Literature from Dublin City University (2007). Her current doctoral research focuses on spatial representations in contemporary fantastic narrative – a co-supervised project between the UAB and DCU, funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences. She has taught Spanish Language and Literature in DCU and in the Instituto Cervantes de Dublin, and she has participated in several conferences, the latest of which was the *Coloquio Internacional: Lo fantástico en la literatura y el arte en Latinoamérica* (Sept. 2009), with a paper entitled 'The Hideouts of Reality: fantastic spaces in the short story "Mi hermana Elba" (1980) by Cristina Fernández-Cubas'. She is also a member of the European Network for Comparative Literary Studies.

Muireann Leonard holds a BA in French and English from NUI Galway (2005) and an MA in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies from the University of Limerick (2009). One of her principal areas of interest lies in French-Canadian culture, having lived in Québec for two years. Her MA thesis was entitled ‘Poets of their Time, Poets of the Timeless: A Comparative Study of the Public and the Personal in the Work of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gaston Miron’. She presented a paper at the ‘The European Avant-Garde 1890-1930’ conference in University College Dublin (Sept.) entitled ‘The Reach of Revolutionary Aesthetics: A Comparative Study of the Influence of the European Avant-Garde on the Work of the American and Québécois poets, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gaston Miron’. She is currently pursuing an MA in International Journalism Studies at DCU.

Manus O Duibhir is a graduate of University College Cork. He is currently a ‘Maria Barbeito Doctorate Scholarship’ holder in the Department of Comparative Literature and Theory of Literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela, where he is writing a thesis on the work of Spanish post-war poet, José Ángel Valente. Research interests include twentieth-century Spanish poetry, twentieth-century Irish poetry, romantic literary theory, and contemporary critical theory.

Bevin Doyle is a PhD researcher in the School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies in Dublin City University. She completed an M.A in Comparative Literature in DCU in 2007, with a dissertation entitled ‘Art and Ekphrasis in Chaim Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev*’. Through her current research, she continues her interest in Ekphrasis and the use of visual art in literature, focussing on the work of Irish author John Banville. Other research interests include literature and cinema – including cinematic adaptations – Anglo-Irish literature, and postcolonial literature.

Zara Blake completed her BA in Irish and English (as joint majors) from University College Dublin in 2008. She recently completed her MPhil in Comparative Literature in Trinity College, Dublin, and has now started a PhD in Dublin City University. Her doctoral research, ‘Invisible Literature: Literary Expressions of Marginalisation from the Gaeltacht to the Ghetto’, involves a comparative exploration of the connections between Irish Language writers and African-American writers.