A Tangled Web:
Ideas, Images, Symbols
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Coordenação
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A TANGLED WEB: Ideas, Images, Symbols

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The Tenses of the Imagination
The Imitation of Life in Literary and Cultural Studies

Luísa Leal de Faria
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I must begin by confessing that my title, “The Tenses of Imagination,” is not original: I borrowed it from the last chapter of the book *Writing in Society* by Raymond Williams. His statement, right at the start, that “imagination has a history,” and that “there are changing and conflicting interpretations of what it is and of its value” (Williams 259), seemed to summarize something I have been thinking about on the subject of “representation.” In the tradition already set by Williams in *Culture and Society*, and later in *Keywords*, where he included the study of the senses and the uses of words in English as fundamental tools for the understanding of “culture,” it seemed always clear that the semantics of the word “imagination” were connected to the Latin root: to imagine is to make an image, which linguistically relates to “to imitate.” The contemporary study of “representation,” on the other hand, emphasising the significance of collective symbolic representations, seemed to obliterate other possibilities of interpretation of the uses of representation, namely the importance of the concept of imitation, or mimesis, and the mimetic approach as a theory of representation.

The concept of imitation, or mimesis, has, indeed, suffered a dramatic shift in recent literary and cultural history. In the last couple of decades the word has almost vanished from critical texts and was replaced by another word and another concept: representation. This change means a shift in emphasis which reveals new trends in literary and cultural analysis. What I want to discuss, briefly, is the significance of this change; or, in other words, why it is important to recognize that the vanishing of a word and its substitution with another carries such deep meanings and far reaching consequences for those who work in literary and cultural studies.

“Imitation” refers, as we all know, to a body of theory that Stuart Hall called the “reflective or mimetic approach” to explaining how representation
of meaning through language works (Hall 24). And, in a very good and useful chapter of the book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, “The Work of Representation,” it becomes quite clear that we are faced with two totally different methods which call for, of course, the use of different words. If it was accepted, along the centuries, that art imitated life, or even, more recently, that life imitated art, we come now to the conclusion that there are severe limitations to the concept of mimesis and that we must replace it with a different concept, that translates the symbolic and the collective in the process of communication. This is what Hall calls the “constructionist approach,” which recognizes the “public, social character of language,” and emphasises the construction of meaning through the use of representational systems – concepts and signs” (Hall 25).

But, when we try to follow the genealogy of the use of the words and their meaning in time, imitation and representation come to stress two different aspects of what is, if I may call it so, the creative process. In a very general, and perhaps provocative way, I would say that mimesis or imitation theorizes the aesthetic views on literature and the arts, and representation theorizes the political implications of literature and the arts. Imagination, then, a word usually associated with the creative process, suffers accordingly.

In a discussion of “imitation,” “representation” and finally “imagination,” it is perhaps useful to start with Plato and Aristotle, and remember how differently they appreciated the concept of imitation. For both, poetry imitated life. But whereas for Aristotle poetry represented the highest truth about men, for Plato poetry played a devastating influence in the balance of the city. Aristotle was concerned with definitions of the ways in which tragedy imitated life, with the means through which feelings could be aroused in the spectator. Poetics, for him, were concerned with words, sounds, gestures; tragedy imitated the lives of superior men, comedy the lives of lower men. One uplifted the feelings of the public, the other provoked laughter. For Aristotle in the *Poetics* poetry and drama are just there, as part of a culture in which they represent the infinite possibilities of human endeavour. For him, poetry has a higher status than history, exactly because it imitates life, whereas history just describes facts. In imitation, Aristotle founds the representation of what is possible, verisimilar and necessary. The difference between the historian and the poet does not lie in
the fact that one writes in prose and the other in verse, but rather in the fact that one says “the things that happened” and the other “the things that might happen” (Aristotle). Therefore, poetry is more philosophical and higher than history, because it is concerned with the universal, whereas history is concerned with the particular. And the “possible” is, according to Aristotle, something we believe in.\footnote{“É pois a tragédia imitação de acções de carácter elevado, completa em si mesma, de certa extensão, em linguagem ornamentada e com as várias espécies de ornamentos distribuídas pelas diversas partes do drama, imitação que se efectua, não por narrativa, mas mediante actores, e que, suscitando o terror e a piedade, tem por efeito a purificação (catarse) desses sentimentos” (Aristóteles 110). “...[A] tragédia não é imitação de homens, mas de acções e de vida, de felicidade ou de infelicidade” (Aristóteles 111). “Não é ofício do poeta narrar o que realmente acontece; é, sim, o de representar o que poderia acontecer, quer dizer: o que é possível, verosímil e necessariamente”... “Por isso, a poesia é mais filosófica e elevada do que a história, pois refere aquela principalmente o universal, e esta o particular” (Aristóteles 117).} Poetry comes close to truth, but truth of a higher nature: not just what was later called realism, the imitation of real situations, but the rising of the particular to universal status.

For Plato, the arts suffer a severe indictment; they are third degree imitations, that is, they are three times removed from the reality of forms. In the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucus, in Book X of the Republic, Plato denounces the falsity of art, and claims the superiority of the carpenter above the painter or the poet, stresses the uselessness of Homer and the need to banish poetry and the poets from the city. If Voluptas, the voluptuous Muse, was allowed in, then “pleasure and pain would be kings of the city, replacing law and reason” (Plato 372),\footnote{“Si, au contraire, tu admets la Muse voluptueuse, le plaisir et la douleur seront rois de ta cité, à la place de la loi et de ce principe que, d’un commun accord, on a toujours regardé comme le meilleur, la raison.” (Plato 372)} and the structure would collapse: people would follow the feelings excited in them by the examples of tragedy or comedy, they would take imitation for reality, they would corrupt the harmony of a city that should be ruled, not by imagination, but by reason. Poetry could only be allowed in the city under very strict controlling conditions. “If imitative poetry can prove, with good reason, that it may
have a place in a well policed city, then we will gladly receive it, because we are aware of the fascination it has upon us – but it would be impious to betray what we take to be the truth,”3 claims Socrates (Plato). In other words, Plato denies to poetry the status of truth, and restricts it to philosophy. But when he recognizes that poetry exerts a deep fascination upon people, Plato recognizes that poetry possesses a fantastic subversive power which should be banished for the sake of harmony and reason; if allowed to remain the city, then poetry should be under the control of the state.

Aristotle and Plato started two different ways of looking at literature. Their views of the power of imagination and its capacity to imitate life took opposite directions: Aristotle stressed the aesthetic implications, Plato the political ones. But in a way, they must be taken together in the complex question of canon formation, a central issue when we want to discuss imitation, representation and imagination. The aesthetic implications related to the choice of canonical works has always mingled with their representative capacity. And representation here acquires a double sense: canonical works represent “the best that has been thought and written in the world,” as Matthew Arnold might say, and so they stand for other works; together, these works represent a way in which a society, or a group, wishes to represent itself. In this sense, the choice of books, as a result either of the workings of the selective tradition, as Raymond Williams put it, or as a result of more intentional policies of national culture formation, is cultural and political. Along the centuries, the subversive power of literature triggered, more than once, repressive measures of book banishment. The political implications of selection and exclusion suggest a Platonic control over the imagination, which came to the fore when the politics of canon formation began to be discussed a few decades ago. My point is that we cannot dissociate the question of the aesthetic value of a literary work from its representative value in the question of the canon. But it is also that the

3 “Déclarons néanmoins que si la poésie imitative peut nous prouver par de bonnes raisons qu’elle a sa place dans une cité bien policée, nous l’y recevrons avec joie, car nous avons conscience du charme qu’elle exerce sur nous – mais il serait impie de trahir ce qu’on regarde comme la vérité.” (Plato 372)
stress put nowadays on the political implications of the choice of literary syllabi often obscures the interpretation of literature as literature.

For centuries, the concept of mimesis seemed a very satisfactory way in which to discuss literature. In this context, the comprehensive work *Mimesis: Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, by Erich Auerbach remains, in my view, an inescapable reference, not only because of its breadth and insight, but also because of some of the problems it also raises. With Auerbach, we follow a fascinating process of canon formation in Western literature, from the *ur-texts The Odyssey* and the Bible to contemporary literature. We follow a discourse on literature that proceeds within the codes of the reflective or mimetic approach, but in a highly sophisticated way. Auerbach never stresses a possible relationship between the works of literature and the social or political contexts in which they were produced and consumed. He probably expects the reader to know, but that relationship is certainly of little importance. What is important is the relationship between literature and literature, a kind of anxiety of influence, and the stylistic constraints within which the works were produced. Auerbach examines the way through which the realism of the *Odyssey* and the figurative meanings of the Bible mingle and separate in centuries of European literature conditioned by the theory of the styles. His thesis, if it can be put in a couple of words, is that “modern realism in the form it reached in France in the early nineteenth century is, as an aesthetic phenomenon, characterized by complete emancipation from [the doctrine of styles]” (Auerbach 554). And he goes on to say that this emancipation is more complete, and more significant for later literary forms of the imitation of life than any previous attempt, and that Stendhal and Balzac opened the way to modern realism, “which has ever since developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life” (Auerbach 554). Still, for Auerbach there were previous revolutions against the doctrine of the styles, namely during the Middle-Ages and throughout the Renaissance, when a “serious realism” had existed. It was the artificial return to classicism towards the end of the sixteenth century that had interrupted a tradition in realism which took shape, in the Middle-Ages, around the story of Christ “with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy” (Auerbach 555).
Auerbach and *Mimesis* seemed relevant to me, in the context of this discussion, for two connected reasons: on the one hand, *Mimesis* discusses at length the “representation of reality in Western Literature”; on the other, the architecture of the whole work points to one argument put forward by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*: “The Western Canon does not exist in order to augment preexisting social elites. It is there to be read by you and by strangers, so that you and those you will never meet can encounter authentic aesthetic power and the authority of what Baudelaire (and Erich Auerbach after him) called ‘aesthetic dignity’ (Bloom 36). But, as John Guillory reminds us, the question of aesthetic judgement is perhaps the wrong question to ask in the context of canon formation. The appeal to a transcendent court of judgement that decides value or the kind of pleasure works of art may give, made by the conservative defenders of the canon, or, on the other hand, the argument that judgement is always interested or prejudiced, put forward by the liberal critics, who therefore appeal to the standards of representative democracy, are wrong ways to look into this matter. In other words, we must dismiss the “scene of conspiracy” or the “scene of representation” (Guillory 235) where the debate took place in recent years, and look at the institutional context where the reproduction of the works is insured, that is, where their continual reintroduction to generations of readers is performed (Guillory 237). And that is, in large measure, the “school”.

For Guillory, the right way to look at canon formation would be to understand the historical circumstances that determined its shapes, and see its history as the history of both the production and reception of texts (Guillory 238), under the understanding that writing and reading are social practices, subjected to institutional forms of organization, of which the most important is the school. “The canon,” he states, “is itself a historical event; it belongs to the history of the school” (244). The school should, now, resist homogenizing canonical works in any way, and alternatively, begin to historicize them. By doing this, Guillory stresses that it may be “possible to acquire not only the knowledge the school offers but a knowledge of this knowledge, a knowledge of how the practice of reading is regulated or constrained by the institution and its social formation” (248).

When quoting these words I am inevitably reminded of Plato: of literature as third degree imitation, and of the need to tame imagination to fit
the needs of the city, just as Guillory’s approach suggests a removal from the text into the contexts, a removal from the enjoyment of the text to the study of its function as a social tool. The historical context of canon formation and the view that reading and writing are social practices are two very important questions that should be included in literary and cultural studies. But beyond these issues, that we can research and describe using the tools of the historian and of the sociologist, is it still possible to rescue for the study of literature the aesthetic dimension that a reading of Aristotle suggests?

As an example of a possible way in which to study canonicity, John Guillory reproduces Done’s poem “The Canonization”, and declares: “I shall not attempt here an interpretation of the poem, but only a kind of historical contextualization, a reflection of its canonicity, which is offered as a preface to interpretation” (Guillory 245). This is a long way from the first reference to canonicity applied to secular literature that I have found in the English language. I am referring to an essay by Carlyle, written in 1840. It is called “The Hero as Poet”, and deals on Dante and Shakespeare. In the age of “Sceptical Dilettantism” and “Triviality,” when men worship the shows of things, says Carlyle, “have we not two mere Poets, if not deified, yet we may say beatified? Shakespeare and Dante are Saints of Poetry; really, if we will think of it, canonised, so that it is impiety to meddle with them. … They are canonised, though no Pope or Cardinals took hand in doing it. Such, in spite of every perverting influence, in the most unheroic times, is still our indestructible reverence for heroism” (Carlyle 85).

When the study of literature stressed its relation to mimesis, or the imitation of life, the power of “creative imagination” exerted its fascination upon the readers, as it did upon Carlyle. The ambiguity contained in the word – imagination as “one of the highest prerogatives of Man. By this faculty he unites, independently of the will, former images and ideas, and thus creates brilliant and novel results,” as Darwin said in 1871, or imagination as the “fabrication of images without any foundation in reality,” as Kames wrote in 1762 (quoted in Williams 260) – was unimportant. But when the reader turned into the critic, when the profession of Literature required that tools for interpretation and transmission be developed in the school, the transforming power of imagination upon fact had to be anatomised, leading, sometimes, to the autopsy of the literary text, in what Antony Easthope called
“the modernist reading.” And when the “cultural turn” in literary studies began to take place, when the concept of “signifying practices” began to replace “rhetoric” and “genre,” then imagination turned into representation.

From Plato and Aristotle to contemporary times, the paradigms of literary and of cultural studies make, indeed, a “tangled web.”

References


The Rechabite Emblem, Rituals and Ceremonies

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And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink ye wine. But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us saying. Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever.

Jeremiah 35:5-6
Ideas, images and symbols intertwine in any society we care to examine. Nowadays, they have free passage on the world’s cultural and commercial highways. Globalization has ensured that certain symbols and imagery in the late twentieth century are recognised worldwide. Whoever is unable to associate a brand name and slogan with the symbol shown below, for example, does not share the contemporary Western culture.

![The Nike "swoosh"]

The campaign advertisements of companies like Nike are able to reach a global market, thus enabling people of vastly different local cultures to simultaneously feel part of Western culture. The masterful simplicity of a quasi-universally recognisable symbol for correctness and positiveness was surely a stroke of marketing genius on Carolyn Davidson’s part. The slogan “Just Do It” commands us, simply, to act, (using the right Nike product for the job, of course). The Nike swoosh is illustrative of a certain kind of symbol, the kind that, after profound implantation in a culture, is subliminally, and cynically used for commercial profit.

However, symbols do not have to be so simplistic in order to be effective – in order for the intended ideas to be successfully associated with them. The Founding Fathers of America put their heads together in 1776 and, after trial and error, in 1782 decided on the unique combination of symbols and mottoes for both sides of the Great Seal which conveyed their vision of America.

The ideas the creators wanted to convey about their new nation included a preference for peace (the American bald eagle, the noblest of birds, which rises above everything, looks to the left, to the olive branch and not to the right, the thirteen arrows symbolising warfare). The majestic

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1 Graphic art student Ms Davidson introduced the ‘swoosh’ to Nike’s founders in 1971, 17 years before the slogan ‘Just Do It’ was adopted. The Nike brand name is derived from the name of the Greek god of victory.
eagle and the stars and stripes have come to represent America today, and are universally recognised. In the eighteenth century, the complex symbolism incorporated in the Great Seal portrayed ideas which would have been easily recognisable to a contemporary populace. However, I doubt whether many of today’s citizens of Uncle Sam, (another powerful symbol in itself), could so readily decipher the ideas underpinning the different symbols. Symbolism is culture- and time-bound.

Gusfield notes that: “It is in symbols, rituals and ceremonies that societies reflexively perceive themselves” (Gusfield 39). I would add: societies or sections of them. For example, the extremist ideas of a particular teetotal friendly society called the Independent Order of Rechabites (IOR) are reinforced by the society’s symbolic emblem, rituals and ceremonies. The members of this total abstinence society were united by well-defined concepts and ideas which were easily identifiable in the emblem of the Order,² created in 1835, the elements of which will be briefly described.

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² At the Second Movable Conference, Liverpool, 1837, the Committee’s Report stated “That lectures on the various symbols in the arms and upon the object of Rechabitism be delivered in our Tents” (Campbell 69).
The Emblem

PEACE AND PLENTY THE REWARDS OF TEMPERANCE

Fig. 3 The Rechabite Emblem

1 sword & olive branch  8 eye  14 rainbow
2 bee hive  9 doves  15 Ark of the Covenant
3 wheat sheaf  10 tents  16 serpent
4 moon & 7 stars  11 life boat  17 sun
5 Angel of Plenty  12 cornucopia / horn of plenty  18 rose, thistle, shamrock & leek
6 twisted cord  13 St. George & the dragon  19 Angel of Peace
7 lamb

I wish to thank William Turnbull of the Rechabite Society (now Healthy Investment), and Rex Madin PHCR, for their help with the interpretation of the symbols of the Rechabite emblem.
1. Bee hive: bees represent hard work. In heraldry, bees usually appear in groups and symbolise a sense of order as well as diligence.

2. Wheat sheaf: the wheat sheaf represents goodness and plenty, the reward of honest work. It is the basic food stuff which cannot be anything but the gift of the gods.

3. Moon & 7 stars: they indicate that we must be the reflectors of the light of temperance truth. The seven stars remind us of the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation and may signify that Rechabitism is for all churches and is not confined to a particular section of religious people. Seven is the perfect number and suggests that we must aim at perfection even though we may not attain it.

4. Angel of Plenty: she is next to a horn of plenty, full of fruits and flowers, signifying that Temperance will bring good things.

5. Twisted cord: this represents strength and unity. We must be united if we are to defeat this great enemy strong drink.

6. Lamb: the lamb represents sacrifice, in particular, self-sacrifice. To get the most out of life we must be willing to both deny ourselves and to do good to others.

7. (All-seeing) eye: we must be watchful and sober. God is watching.

8. Doves: they have symbolised gentleness, peace and love since ancient times.

9. Tents: Rechabite branches are called tents. The Biblical passage from Jeremiah 35: 5-6, quoted at the beginning of this paper, suggested the name ‘Rechabite’ for the teetotal society, and as the Sons of Rechab dwelt in tents, the choice of the ‘tent’ as the basic unit of each society was an obvious one.

10. Life boat: this connotes rescue – the Rechabites will rescue drinkers from their peril.

11. Cornucopia/horn of plenty: this is the reward of temperance.

12. St George & the dragon: the patron saint of England represents the fight against evil.

13. Rainbow: the symbol of the covenant. God made a covenant with the ancient Rechabites. The covenant is the promise given by one person to one or more people, i.e. the promise not to drink alcohol.


15. Serpent: the serpent reminds us of the biblical words of Solomon concerning wine. It “bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.” The serpent is also a symbol of wisdom – it would be wise to avoid strong drink.

16. Sun: this represents God. The light and heat, of which the sun is the source, symbolises Truth and Love. For the Rechabites, the truth about strong drink
must be made known.

17. Rose, thistle, shamrock & leek: these are the four floral emblems representing the countries of the United Kingdom.

18. Angel of Peace: she holds an olive branch, the universal symbol of peace.

19. Sword & olive branch: the olive branch is the emblem of peace, while the sword stands for justice. For the Rechabites, their cause is a just one. They are not going to put the sword down until they have driven the robber strong drink from the land.

The main idea behind the Rechabite emblem is reflected in the motto: “Peace and Plenty the Rewards of Temperance.” The idea that spiritual and material gain is a natural product of temperance underpins the whole Rechabite ethos. The individual symbols, juxtaposed on a heraldic shield, transmit a positive message of success through individual effort, supported by God. There are Christian references (the eye and Ark of the Covenant), and also patriotic national symbols (St George, the rose, thistle, shamrock and leek). The former is not surprising, for the creator of both the emblem and the ritual, Rev. Joseph Thompson, was a church minister, albeit of a relatively obscure sect called the Cowherdites. There are some similarities with Masonic symbols (especially the all-seeing eye, which appears in a triangle in many lodges, over the Master’s chair). Some members would undoubtedly have been members of both societies. Indeed, the symbolic eye was present in ALL friendly society logos. This demonstrates the tangled web of ideas, symbols and imagery that intertwined, and intertwines, in different organisations of a voluntary self help or philanthropic nature.

Through identification with the symbolic emblem of their organisation, Rechabites received support and encouragement. However, they stressed a negative image of drink itself. In this respect they were no different from the other thousands of teetotallers active in the nineteenth century. The effect of an exaggerated emphasis on the dangers of taking “the first sip,” for example, and the demonization of strong drink in any form or taken for any reason whatsoever, were powerful reinforcers, ensuring a certain code of

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4 They abstained from all animal flesh and all intoxicating drinks.
conduct among members of the society. (It is not clear how successful this ploy was in actually converting people to teetotalism). The picture below, taken from a nineteenth-century temperance journal, is illustrative of this point. The title is self-explanatory. “Death Unmasked” shows a bottle of liquor in its “true” colours – death. On revelation the imbibers are shocked, but will they heed the message?

Fig. 4 “Death Unmasked”
Supplement to *The Preston Temperance Advocate*, July 1836, front page.

Ritual and Ceremonies

Rituals and ceremonies were an important part of the Rechabite experience, although they were certainly not unique to this friendly society. Initiation was particularly important, and every new member had to participate. It had two aims; to bond the newcomer to his tent through a shared experience, and to reinforce the serious intention behind the society – mutual benefit. There are strong parallels with freemasonry, and indeed the Rechabite ceremonies may have arisen by imitation, when freemason members brought their practices with them into friendly societies.
An extract from the First Rechabite “Making” Book is shown below.

MAKING PART FOR THE C.R. [Chief Ruler]

(…) (The C.R. taking a Brother by the hand, shall say):
This union of our hands is a type of that union of the heart which ought to subsist between us and every brother belonging to this honourable Order, for, when mankind are only externally united together, we often find that “trifles light as air” frequently separate man from man and cause them to become the direct enemies of each other; but when mankind are united in heart and in life, nothing on earth can separate them – nothing but death; nay, not even that can dissolve the friendship that is cemented between them. (…)

I shall now acquaint you with a few signs and tokens peculiar to our Order. We have some others which will be made known to you after you have been initiated the proper time.

PASSWORD,
ENTER, SIGN, – RAPS AT THE DOOR.
SIGNIFICATION.

PASSWORD, COUNTERSIGN,
SIGNIFICATION

(Worthy Levite, introduce our Brother to our most worthy Past Chief Ruler)
(Campbell 15)

Rituals and ceremonies also had a public face. The procession (see fig. 5 below) served to both reinforce the fraternal, common bonds of members and also to show the community their pride and strength. Before feasts, meetings, funerals and more joyful celebrations, members of a tent would march through the streets. As well as regalia, a giant marching banner was a common feature. To celebrate Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne, Rechabites marched in Castletown, Isle of Man:

At 11 o’clock, the members of the Independent Order of Rechabites (who celebrated their anniversary on this occasion), with the children of the various Sunday-schools of the town and neighbourhood to the number of about 1,000, assembled at the green, and walked in procession, accompanied by the Rechabite Band, to St. Mary’s Church. The Rechabites, two and two, with their band of music, and two splendid banners: one bearing a representation
of the prophet Jeremiah and the sons of Rechab, reverse, the Arms of the Order, supported by Peace and Plenty. The other bore the Temperance Arms; reverse, John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, supported by Temperance and Justice. The flags were painted by Messrs Smith, of Castletown, and by our own countryman Mr C. Hudson, of this town [Douglas]. They were very much admired, and reflected credit upon the artists. The Rechabites retired to the Tent, at the Schoolhouse [probably the Primitive Methodist], where a plentiful supply of tea, buns, and beef, was provided; after partaking of it, the band and a few of the members again walked through some of the streets. A public temperance meeting was held in the market-place, where great attention was given to the addresses delivered.


Not everyone thought public processions a good idea, however. The following Isle of Man newspaper extract of 1837, although sympathetic to the Rechabite cause, is particularly critical of the “revolting spectacle” of parading women.

“All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players.”

The truth of the above lines of our immortal Bard, are every day more and more confirmed, for scarcely has one silly pageant passed from our view, but another, if possible still sillier, is ready to supply its place, and the rival candidates for absurd distinction, jostle each other on the stage for precedence. We were led into this train of thinking by the motley exhibition of Tuesday last. With the nature of *tee-totalism* no one can find fault, we feel favourably disposed towards it, from the great and obvious benefit it has conferred on society, being mainly instrumental in removing from it many vile and revolting scenes of self-debasement and self-sacrifice; – good indeed must be that institution or society, let it be Rechabite Tee-total, Temperance, or what it may, which has the power to arrest the steps of man on the downward path to perdition, and that too at a time when all other stay has lost its power and efficacy. This could all be accomplished, and men, however vile; could return to that line of duty they had so recklessly left, without all this parade of flags, stars,
gilt sparrows, inverted wine glasses, scarfs, medals, rosettes and such masonic 
or *odd fellow-looking* trumpery, without having recourse to

“The thundering drum, 
Or the vile squeaking of the wry-neck’d fife,”

and filling our peaceable old town with all the tumult and noise of a general 
election; but even admitting the utility of the procession, as regards the 
males, we know not a more ridiculous, nay, revolting spectacle than that of 
the rosy checked daughters of our Isle — against whom it would be foul and 
wrong even to breathe a suspicion injurious to their virtues — to see them 
parading our streets and forming a conspicuous part in the procession, and 
courting observation, — the retiring from which is women’s greatest charm, 
and allowing the world to judge that their practices must have been the most 
abandoned, to justify each a humiliation, in which

“They roughen to the sense, 
And all the winning softness of the sex is lost.”

(*Manx Liberal*, 29 July 1837)

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**Fig. 5 A Friendly Society Procession**

An important part of ritual and ceremony was the Rechabite regalia. 

Richardson Campbell wrote of the Rechabite sash:

White is an emblem of purity for the Rechabites. The white sash, therefore, 
is to teach you that your life must be pure and free from immoral blemishes, 
and I trust that while you wear the robe of purity you will keep yourself 
unspotted from the world. (*Campbell* 15).
Regalia served to distinguish members from one another, each official had his/her own distinctive marker, and also to show a common bond. It was a source of pride for members.

Each official of the Rechabites had a ritualistic and a practical function. Some of the evocative names for officials of the IOR, with modern equivalents, are shown below. Their functions are self-evident.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HCR</td>
<td>High Chief Ruler (President)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDR</td>
<td>High Deputy Ruler (Vice President)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>Chief Ruler (Branch Chairman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCR</td>
<td>Past Chief Ruler (Past Branch Chairman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCR</td>
<td>Deputy Chief Ruler (Branch Vice Chairman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>Corresponding Secretary (Clerk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Sick Steward (Sick Visitor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IG</td>
<td>Inside Guardian (Inside Doorkeeper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OG</td>
<td>Outside Guardian (Outside Doorkeeper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TS</td>
<td>Tent Steward (Assistant at Meetings)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rechabite nomenclature and rituals, as seen in the use of official titles, passwords, and initiation ceremonies, were important because they provided the membership of each Tent with a distinctive means of identity that differentiated them both from other friendly/teetotal society members and from ordinary citizens; by holding to the teetotal pledge, keeping to the ceremonies, and with the mutual support of the other members, they strove to improve their life and that of others.
We are surrounded by a tangled web of ideas, images and symbols. The Independent Order of Rechabites is just one example of how individuals, through combination, can use these elements to their own and to society’s advantage.

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A Touch of Disenchantment.
An Approach to Isaiah Berlin’s
“The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”

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A Touch of Disenchantment.
An Approach to Isaiah Berlin’s
“The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”

“Life can be seen through many windows, none of them necessarily clear or opaque, less or more distorting than any of the others.”

This encapsulation engraved on the glass-fronted rooms of Wolfson College, founded by Isaiah Berlin (1966), bespeaks of his openness and democratic view of the world at large. However, the optimistic tone which we can feel, I would say almost touch, in these words seems, on occasion, to be clouded by doubts. That is precisely the case with his essay “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West” (1978).

As part and parcel of a volume edited by Henry Hardy (1990), entitled Isaiah Berlin. The Crooked Timber of Humanity, this essay does a thorough analysis of the essential options and expectations of humanity throughout the ages.

Focusing on the notion of utopian discourse, Isaiah Berlin, questions the possibilities of prevalence of such a trend of thought whose outstanding trait is the strong belief in man’s ability to achieve, or at least to conceive perfection. As he states, “the idea of a perfect society is a very old dream, whether because of the ills of the present, which lead men to conceive of what their world would be like without them – or because these Utopias are fictions deliberately constructed as satires, intended to criticise the actual world and to shame those who control existing regimes, or those who suffer them too tamely;” (Berlin “Decline Utopian Ideas” 20). This old dream, as Berlin tells us, dates back to Antiquity, with works from Plato or Aristotle onwards, as well as from the Biblical narrative.

For Berlin, these utopian works may rise from an idyllic past, looking back on a lost golden age, or a paradise later made inaccessible for mankind. In both cases, man becomes an outcast owing to his own error, either the
hubristic error of the hero, who, defying the gods, after a turn of the wheel of fortune meets his tragic fate, or the sin of disobedience which in the Christian narrative triggers off the expulsion of the primeval couple.

In spite of the relevance of these visions in the history of western ideas, the most influential are, in my opinion, those which project their dream in a more or less remote future. In so doing they are nurturing ideologies, that is, in the words of Raymond Williams, “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group or class,” or even “a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge” (175); so, utopian writing is a way of deploying a fair amount of sensible reasoning in order to convince the reader that he is being introduced to the paragon of a happy society or living system. Whether it resolves itself into an illusion or not, does not alter the fact that a systematic representation of a possible reality is on offer. More’s *Utopia* is the first of many other utopian fictions mainly of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods displaying this kind of perfect alternative to their own contemporaneous real society.

However, in his approach both of retrospective or prospective works, Berlin highlights the need for a universal idea of perfection, stemming from timeless, universal values, conveyed by utopian discourse. Usually these values are identified in total unison as truth, virtue and happiness. Truth and virtue would concur to ensure humankind a happy life, bearing in mind, of course, that the notion of what a happy life consists of will have a unique answer. So the author considers a universalistic *Weltanschauung* opening the way for the flourishing of Utopia a quite unavoidable premise. If one is tempted by a sceptical or relativistic view of society or of the world, the utopian dream will stop making sense; it will just fall apart.

Thus, Berlin confronts the Enlightenment and the Romantic periods as the two poles of a universalistic and a pluralistic conception of life. The former corresponds to the richest production of utopian works, whereas the latter presents its decline.

Actually, Berlin’s evaluation of the Enlightenment seems rather complex, or as Raymond Tallis puts it in a subtitle to his work, *Enemies of Hope*, his attitude is one of “Yes-But to the Enlightenment” (1). On the one hand, Enlightenment means the apology of absolute reason as the key to the
understanding of the Universe. René Descartes stands as its main voice, especially through his essay “Discourse on Method” (1637), the masterpiece which would teach man to hold the key of the mysteries of the universe. There were, however, voices against the rationalist stream, namely from the empiricist model based on the experimental approach defended by Francis Bacon as far back as the early years of the seventeenth-century, and by Newton’s scientific triumphs in the field of physics, and later theorised by John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690). This trend of thought, despite the methodological divergence from the rationalist point of view, also agreed with the idea of a pattern of universal laws which would uncover Nature to the human mind. Rationalists and empiricists alike trusted the extraordinary qualities of humankind to improve their lot in a variety of ways. This widespread self-assurance was very suitably expressed in Pope’s epic poem, Essay on Man (1744).

The emphasis on knowledge, present in Pope’s poem – “know then thyself, presume not God to man,/The proper study of mankind is man” (Pope 14) – refers to Berlin’s conception of knowledge in western culture, with its origins in the classical and Judaic-Christian matrix, not just as descriptive knowledge of the universe, but simultaneously as ethical and political knowledge transferable into action. “To know what is good is to yield a good way of living” (Berlin: Crooked Timber 28-29).

All these meant there was a strong hope that the conditions for a better standard of living were developing, that is, a strong belief in progress was growing. Utopian discourse opened the way to inform and convince an even wider intellectual circle of the benevolent bias of the profound changes to be expected. The idea of bienfaisance, defended by philosophers such as Leibniz, Spinoza or Shaftesbury, to name but a few among the optimistic European thinkers, went in tandem with the dream of a healthy, peaceful society where nobody had to perform unpleasant tasks, suffer injustice or any kind of threat, all of them common facets of Utopia.

The epic, interventen capacity of Enlightenment utopias apparently impressed Isaiah Berlin: the route of progress towards perfection is the kind of ideal that helps to strengthen Berlin through his haphazard life. Having to move from one country to another since his childhood and later having to face two World Wars and keeping “a prodigiously energetic capacity
for enjoyment of life, of people in all their variety, of their ideas and idiosyncrasies, of literature, of music, of art,” as Henry Hardy says (1), is no small feat.

On the other hand, as Peter Gay points out, a programme of progress is not a theory of progress (100). Christian tradition hindered many enlightened thinkers (with some exceptions like Turgot or, on occasion, Voltaire) from an enthusiastic support of a progress-based theory of life in general. Some of them would defend, instead, a cyclical theory. David Hume, for instance, observes that tendency in the course of civilization:

“When the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, from that moment they naturally, or rather necessarily decline, and seldom or never revive in that nation, where they formerly flourished” (135).

Also the uniform and controlled environment recurrent in utopian literature and, above all, its static nature strike a note precisely against that notion of enlightened progress. Once perfection is reached, there is no room for perfecting either man or society. The superlative quality of a utopian world becomes claustrophobic as far as individual needs are concerned. At this point the Romantic reaction opposing the excessive rationalistic collective order with emotion and a spiritual vision of relationships – between man and Nature, man and other men, and man and God (or transcendence) – seemed rather more gratifying than the former projects.

Instead of a perfect, tightly ruled society, ensuring human well-being, the Romantic reader discovers in the former utopias a nightmarish oppressive world where there is no place for hope. The danger of levelling as a synonym of lowering the moral, political, aesthetic or even emotional standards of living, thus reducing man to a mere vegetative being satiated with the basic animal needs, causes man’s rejection of the utopian solution. Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (1791) is an illustrative example of this kind of reaction. Its efficacious architectural project of a prison composed of individual cells, ranged round a central post enables a twenty-four hour inexpensive surveillance. This ensures a harmonious self-contained community where violence is suppressed, profit guaranteed, and individual will eradicated. What constituted a highly intelligent achievement for the men of the Enlightenment period became a classic example of Romantic rejection.

Not surprisingly Foucault in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison
explores the very same idea highlighting the importance of psychological domination by a hypothetically constant observation as a means of potential exercise of power. The lack of privacy and especially of an individual identity within a human hive is presented as the negative face of utopian writing, i.e., dystopia.

The rise of dystopian writing implies, in Berlin’s perspective, the decline of utopian ideas in western thought precisely from the Romantic period onwards. In so doing he is devaluing other reactions which had previously emerged, even during the Enlightenment. Although he mentions Montaigne and Montesquieu, he fails to consider the pluralistic approach of L’Esprit des Lois, or of Lettres Persanes as something more significant than apparent, superficial variables, incapable of jeopardizing what he considers the central human goals: the need of food and drink and of security, the urge to procreate, to live in society with justice and a certain degree of liberty… (Crooked Timber 31). However, I think Berlin is here deliberately confounding basic needs man shares with any other living creature, and two essential values which have been the object of multiple diverging interpretation, as Berlin himself brilliantly exposed in his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.”

Doubts about the utopian universalistic dream of a unique perfect society which man was to gain through knowledge began almost as soon as this very ideal took form. As early as 1726, Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels satirised Francis Bacon’s vision of an institution of knowledge and technology capable of improving human society; in 1755 the Lisbon earthquake also reminded men they did not dominate Nature, as Voltaire pointed out in his letter Sur le Désastre de Lisbonne. Again, however, Berlin asserts that even the most pessimistic thinkers of the Enlightenment agreed on the notion of progress and so encouraged humanity’s pursuit of the light of truth, lumen naturale always present and always the same in spite of man’s inability to live under its brilliance due to either wickedness or stupidity (Crooked Timber 52).

The twentieth-century witnessed a considerable increase in dystopian literature and film production, perhaps as a consequence of that recurrent wickedness or stupidity Berlin mentioned. Instead of a narrative of achievements and improvement towards that harmonious static paradise, it
displayed the dispirited bend humankind was suffering from. The fear of a totalitarian regime, as a distorted caricature of Marxist egalitarian dream ideology, or as the aftermath of Hitler's expansionist attempt, together with human insecurity in relation to the mechanised, technologically dominated environment led to the production of works such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, or Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Berlin associates this chilling image of utopia with the individualistic theoretical approach, resulting in pluralistic or relativist solutions for men trying to envisage the best society to live in. That is what he calls “the disturbing heritage of the romantic movement” (*Crooked Timber* 44).

He seems unable to recognise the possibility, or the significance of the simultaneous coexistence of different utopias, according to the different space-located, historical cultures they are related with. He envisages them as the only meagre solution left to men, a negotiation for “some kind of equilibrium, necessarily unstable, between the different aspirations of differing groups of human beings” (*Crooked Timber* 47).

Industrialisation, bureaucracy, massive urbanism and now globalisation with the consequent framing of civic and political rules and laws, with impersonal timetables and a standard way of living may be contributing factors towards the negative reception of well-regulated, secure and monotonously uniform utopian societies of former times. Moreover, the need to assert individual rights, to defend what Isaiah Berlin defined as passive freedom, makes dissatisfaction grow along with material consumerism.

The western world is now engaged in constructing a fundamentally secular and deconsecrated industrial society. This is a society in which – if it is achieved – all men will live in comfort. Perhaps there will also be a large measure of formal freedom and religious and philosophical toleration. But it is a society that threatens to deprive human life of all spiritual content, a society in which the growth of freedom is likely to be accompanied by the growth of numbers of those whose inner emptiness robs them of the desire to use it, a society in which religious and philosophical toleration will be made all the easier to achieve as spiritual impoverishment makes religious and philosophical commitment constantly more rare.

*(Goldman *Philosophy* 95)*
Lucien Goldman’s words draw our attention to another aspect implicit in Berlin’s notion of decadence of utopia, namely, the emptiness, the spiritual desert he may have felt especially in the second half of the twentieth-century western cultures. Escapism would alternate with gloomy visions of a future social framework, thus avoiding a serious answer to the essential issues central to Berlin’s reflection, namely the pursuit of happiness based on justice and freedom. These goals pervade Berlin’s urge for universalism, for timeless values or cardinal ideas through which, in a biographical perspective, he could make sense out of his life scattered over different European countries.

Notwithstanding the patent fragmentary quality of the present day world, it does not necessarily mean the end of a dream; perhaps it induces the end of the dream, but gains a kaleidoscopic power which Berlin himself practiced through his immense intellectual curiosity. Moreover, utopian discourse will benefit from the multiplicity of authorial individualism insofar as it can enrich that otherwise impoverished spiritual heritage.

He asserted that “out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made. And for that reason no perfect solution is, not merely in practice, but in principle, possible in human affairs, and any determined attempt to produce it is likely to lead to suffering, disillusionment and failure” (Crooked Timber 48).

Nowadays, as in Berlin’s lifetime, western culture faces difficult challenges. Terrorism may be paralleled with the horror of Hitler’s genocide. Humanism seems to lose ground confronted with the predatory and destructive wave we are witnessing. However, there is always the other side of this reality. He missed man’s ability to straighten things up, to twist some wrongly directed branches, or, in other words the path to small scattered islands of less imperfect worlds as a guarantee of a perfect teleological vision in progress. Such disbelief could allude to the slight ironic touch of disenchantment which haunts his essay as a legacy marked by a bitter taste of disillusion.

Or perhaps he did glimpse a harmonious world created out of the perfect balance of such opposite ideals when looking through some other of those many windows at Wolfson College, because none of them is “necessarily clear or opaque, less or more distorting than any of the others.”
References


The “Jersey Lily”:
A Tangled Web of Victorian Celebrities

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The “Jersey Lily”:
A Tangled Web of Victorian Celebrities

This paper is based on Lillie Langtry’s autobiography and it will focus on her rise from a tomboy to a provincial housewife and finally a sophisticated PB – i.e., a Professional Beauty. It intends to show how a beautiful woman was able to become a celebrity by taking advantage of a tangled web of ideas, images, and symbols within the Victorian frame of mind.

The remarkable life of the “Jersey Lily” is a good example of a different kind of self-made woman who used her looks and wit in order to gain fame and fortune. Accordingly, she was able to achieve a certain amount of social power and financial independence, both abiding by the rules of society and also breaking them during her lifetime.

Lillie Langtry, née Emilie Charlotte Le Breton, was born in Jersey in the Channel Islands in 1853, and died in 1929 in Monte Carlo, Monaco. One of the last photographs of her, which can be seen at the National Portrait Gallery in London (Beatty viii), depicts her with lilies in her hand. Her Christian names were, in her own words, “dreadful to my way of thinking – but, happily, perhaps on account of my skin being unusually white, I was nicknamed ‘Lillie’ very early in life and that sobriquet has clung to me ever since” (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 13).

Four years prior to her death, she published The Days I Knew,1 a vivid account of the late-Victorian and Edwardian golden circles. Here and there, she mocks “those prudish Victorian days” (Days I Knew: Autobiography 34), saying that “what was considered risqué and compromising then would pass unnoticed in the present day” (185), and even mentions the occasion when

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1 The work was published both in London (Langtry 1925a) and New York (Langtry 1925b). There is no record of the existence of translations.
Queen Victoria made her famous statement “We are not amused” (46-47). The book almost seems a Who’s Who of the period, allowing the reader to get in touch with 19th century public figures such as William Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli, Sir Randolph Churchill, the Baron de Rothschild, the arctic explorer Sir Allen Young, Oscar Wilde, and John Everett Millais, among many others.

As a matter of fact, she was proud to be in the company of “celebrated makers of History” (88). She met some of the most distinguished personalities of her time, including those who belonged to the diplomatic world. For instance, she mentions in her book that she did not understand the Portuguese language when she recalls the occasion when she was introduced to the First Attaché in the Portuguese Legation in London, the Marquis de Soveral, described as a “handsome foreigner” (*Days I Knew: Autobiography* 137). Once, in Paris, he took her to see a bullfight conducted as “the royal Portuguese corridas” (138), an event she enjoyed and described in detail. She also wrote about her exciting experience of racing down the hills inside a tobogган in the island of Madeira, when she stopped there on her way to Cape Town in 1905 (151-152).

Although this volume was published in 1925, it recalled events reaching back to the 1850s, including Queen Victoria’s State funeral procession (139). “Certainly the world and Society have changed a great deal since my early years” (*Days I Knew: Autobiography* 185), she asserts, but her memoirs followed the tradition of Victorian autobiographies,² which were written by people of “lofty reputation” or by people who had something of “historical importance” to say (Marcus 31-32). Most of all, a strong quest for respectability is implicit in the text, as well as an explicit need to recount that the society in which she had grown up had disappeared, at least enough for her to have to describe it to the reader:

In my day London society was very different to what it is now. (...) Rank was more highly considered and the line more finely drawn between the social grades, the inner circle consequently being comparatively small which suggests

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² For an overview of autobiographical theory, see Machann 1-12 and Anderson 1-17.
that in the vastly enlarged society of today the excitement of my advent could
not be repeated. (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 32-33)

Like all autobiographies, The Days I Knew provides a landscape for a
critical comment on theories of representation, both of the self and the
others, and on the division between fact and fiction. According to Laura
Beatty in Lillie Langtry: Manners, Masks and Morals, “by the time she came
to compose her memoirs she had learnt that everything could be rewritten.
Whatever had been sad, unworthy or unscrupulous was transformed at the
touch of a pen” (6).

Consequently, there is not a single allusion to her well-known liaison
with the Prince of Wales, or to her daughter Jeanne-Marie, born in 1881 of
her affair with Prince Louis of Battenberg. Neither is there a word about her
being harassed by King Leopold of the Belgians (Langtry Days I Knew:
Autobiography 89), nor the torrid revelation of any closely-guarded secret.
The only thing she cares to deny is that she once, at a supper party, dropped
a piece of ice down the Prince of Wales’s back (35). It seems she never forgot
Gladstone’s wise words, when he once told her: “In your professional career,
you will receive attacks, personal and critical, just and unjust. Bear them,
never reply, and, above all, never rush into print to explain or defend
yourself” (103). A modern reader can go further, and recall Roland Barthes’s
statement: “It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect”
(15, apud Anderson 1).

The concept of intention has been a recent topic for a discussion
of autobiography (see Marcus 3), and as Linda Anderson points out,
“intentionality’ signals the belief that the author is behind the text,
controlling its meaning” (2). On the one hand, and at first sight, it seems
that Lillie Langtry’s only purpose is to entertain the reader with an
enjoyable narration of her eventful life, and “to bring again the wonder and
the joy and the delight” revealed by “the days I knew”, as she says at the end

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3 Current studies on culture discuss representation as the production of meaning
through language, discourse and image. The intentional approach is only one of the
three theories of representation (see Hall 24-26).
of the book (*Days I Knew: Autobiography* 185). On the other hand, to those who could criticize her futile way of living, there seems to be an emphasis on her pursuit of a serious career on stage, and therefore an intention to set an example for independent women to follow their personal ambitions.

Lillie Langtry was the only daughter of the Dean of Jersey, and grew up with six brothers that made sure she did not become too spoiled. It is reasonable to infer from her own words that the strong character she showed all her life was developed in childhood:

> My brothers lost no opportunity during my earliest youth of impressing on me what a miserable handicap it was to be a girl, a silly creature, given to weeping on the slightest provocation, easily scared and full of qualms. So I was quick to perceive that (…) I must steady my nerves, control my tears and look at things from a boy’s point of view. (*Days I Knew: Autobiography* 20-21)

Pleading weakness was never an option, and this attitude would of course be crucial to her success and distinctiveness, making her more than just a beautiful woman. Her strong will was connected with a physical vitality, and not only did she ride, but also swim and row. In fact, according to Victorian patterns, she had an absolutely feminine beauty and the strong character of a man. Perhaps the more vulnerable side of her personality came to the surface many years later, when the manipulative *femme fatale*, that had led Edward Langtry, her first husband, to drown his sorrows in alcohol and to die in an asylum, became herself a victim of emotional and physical abuse by George Alexander Baird, one of her lovers.

The idyllic scenario of the island as a cherished playground for adventure and freedom during her childhood had been gradually replaced during her adolescence by a feeling of claustrophobia. The magic was gone, and the island had become too small for 20-year-old Lillie. Moreover, it was like a prison from which she had to escape. When she met the then wealthy Mr Langtry, she fell in love with his luxurious yacht, and married the owner. In fact, she married in her travelling gown, on 9 March 1874, because the couple sailed away the same day to Southampton.

As is known, marriage was both the traditional getaway solution and the “conventional starting point for families” (Thompson 90). The new couple even posed for a photograph “looking distinctly Hogarthian,” as Laura Beatty puts it (vii). But for Lillie, as for so many Victorian women,
marriage turned out to be a disappointment. After a severe attack of typhoid fever, her physician ordered a change of air, and in January 1876 the Langtrys moved to London. This was where the real adventure began.

At first, Lillie spent her time reading books and magazines, walking in Hyde Park watching for famous people to pass, and going to museums and picture galleries in order to become aware of all the interesting things that were new to her. The Langtrys knew only a few English families who sometimes wintered in Jersey, like Lord and Lady Suffield, and Lord Ranelagh, whose afternoon parties were very popular. Through him they received their first invitation in London, from Lady Olivia Sebright, an amateur actress and a hostess who gathered at Sunday evening receptions men and women fond of literature and art.

Being in mourning for her younger brother, Lillie wore a simple black gown designed by her Jersey dressmaker, with no jewels – she had none, anyway – and with her hair twisted carelessly at the nape of her neck, in a knot which later became known as “The Langtry” (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 27). She became the centre of attraction in spite of, or probably due to, her modest appearance. In fact, at the dawn of her discovery, she looked like a milliner’s assistant (cf. Beatty vii). That 25-year-old woman had all the qualities of the classic Victorian heroine – she was young, beautiful, unknown, poor, and acceptable.

She was also lucky to be claimed by Sir John Everett Millais as his countrywoman, and he asked her to sit for him so that he could reproduce on canvas her classic features. The “manly” Millais (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 28) had married Effie Gray after the annulment of her white wedding to John Ruskin, and he played the role of Lillie’s father figure by helping her to establish her fame in London.

Among other people whom she met on that first night in London society, early in 1877, and who remained her long-lasting friends, were James McNeill Whistler and Frank Miles (see Beatty vii). The latter, a young artist, made two sketches of her with a lily in her hair on the spot.⁴

One he gave to her, the other he sold the next day to a printer. In no time it was outselling all other prints of PBs, making her face famous. The portraits and pencil drawings of her by Frank Miles, in particular the “Triptych”, show the sensual gaze of her big blue-violet-greyish eyes. On 19 May 1877 *Vanity Fair* recorded Lillie’s arrival in Society:

> All male London is going wild about the Beautiful Lady who has come to us from the Channel Islands. She is certainly the most splendid creature that has ever risen upon London from an unknown horizon, (...) it is as though some newer and more perfect creature had risen, like Aphrodite, from the sea. She has a husband to make her happy, but still awaits a poet to make her known. (Beatty 81)

Her portraits were in every shop window and made the public so familiar with her features that wherever she went, she was immediately recognized. Mrs Langtry was nevertheless able to make fun of the notion of celebrity. For instance, in her autobiography, she recalls an episode when a shopkeeper took her for Sarah Bernhardt. Her comment was: “One celebrity was as another to him” (Langtry *Days I Knew: Autobiography* vi). Her mixed feelings of not only being amused and flattered by all this excitement but also of being afraid for her physical integrity are described in her autobiography (31-32). She had passed in a few weeks from being an anonymous person to a celebrity, and she realized there were both benefits and negative consequences of this overwhelming public attention from all social classes in London.

Generally speaking, people knew the ladies of society, not because they actually met them, but because there were photographs and prints everywhere, especially in magazines and the popular press. Lillie Langtry lived in the age that invented the camera, and photography was emerging as a new art in spite of the fact that it was criticized by painters. On the one hand, they despised it by saying that a photograph was simply an illustration. Consequently, according to them, it was unable to convey inner reality and pure beauty, which could only be depicted on canvas. On the other hand,

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6 For an outline of the nineteenth-century division between “art as expressive creativity and photography as a machine,” see Evans 135.
they feared it because the concept of imitation played an important role in art. Moreover, early photography concentrated on landscape and portraiture, which were regarded as typical subjects of painting and drawing. This explains why, on seeing the first photographs, Edouard Manet said that “from today, painting is dead” (Hall 82). By the eve of the twentieth century, photography was being raised up to other aesthetic domains like painting and literature as a body of practices and values which followed a multi-paradigmatic structure. In fact, its representational role involved “the interactions between the conceptions of photographers in constructing their images and the uses to which their photographs are put” (Hall 80).

In the nineteenth century, artists had thus begun to deplore the fact that the market was being swamped with photographs on every street corner, as well as cheap prints and penny-postcards that were actually bought by poor and rich people alike. Lillie mentions this “photographic craze” (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 33) when she says it was fashionable for shopkeepers to exhibit pictures of ladies in their windows alongside royalty and distinguished statesmen, available for sale.

Sir John Everett Millais was a member of the Royal Academy,7 and therefore he was acclaimed by the upper classes as a “serious” artist. The Millais portrait was exhibited in 1878 at the Royal Academy with great success and was nominated the picture of the year. It caught what the photographs could not – her outstanding colouring and her violet eyes.8 In fact, he once told her that she looked just beautiful for fifty-five minutes of an hour, but for five she was amazing (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 38). She was portrayed in her plain black gown, not in classic robes or sumptuous medieval garments. According to her, “I realised that he loved only the actual and the truth and that in his portraits he dissimulated nothing, rather emphasising the individuality of the sitter than deviating from nature to embellish his subject” (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 36). Millais’s attitude can of course be explained by his belief in Pre-Raphaelites precepts.

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7 He was elected its President months before his death, in 1896.
He was also a follower of the Ruskinian principle of being true to Nature. A striking detail is that she is holding a crimson little flower in her hand, a particular kind of lily that is grown in Jersey, and that was sent from the Channel Islands specifically for the occasion (Langtry *Days I Knew: Autobiography* 36-37). Red is usually connoted with passionate feelings, and it could be interpreted as a symbol of Mrs Langtry’s true nature beyond her plainness, but the painter’s purpose was only to add a touch of colour to a rather grim black and white scheme. Millais called his portrait “A Jersey Lily”, a nickname by which Lillie Langtry was for ever afterwards known.

She became a cultural icon to painters and patrons of the arts because she validated what, until then, had only been a theory. In fact, she was the new aesthetic find, sitting for painters every day, and helping to replace the artificial and unhealthy type of beauty with a fresh and natural style. Moreover, she had something beyond her classic features that made her close to the image of eternal womanhood. Lord Leighton made a number of studies of her and painted her in “Daydreams”, George Frederick Watts painted her in black as “The Dean’s Daughter”, and Sir Edward John Poynter chose to picture her in a golden gown in the Pre-Raphaelite style, reminiscent of Rossetti’s “Lady Lilith” (Beatty vii). Mrs Langtry also appeared, both full-face and in profile, in “The Golden Stairs”, a picture by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and she sat for him as Dame Fortune for “The Wheel of Fortune”. She is depicted as a tall figure with a pitiless face, turning a huge wheel on which naked men, a symbolic allusion to kings, princes, statesmen, millionaires and others, rise, reach the top and then fall, to be crushed by an ever-revolving wheel of Fate. No wonder she always disliked this allegory of her (Langtry *Days I Knew: Autobiography* 40).

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10 See “Burne-Jones” <http://www.artchive.com/viewer/1.html>. The picture was finished in 1880 and is on show at Tate Gallery, London.

She did not have many superstitions, but she did not like peacocks and peacock feathers because she thought they brought her bad luck (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 84). As for the black dress she wore on her debut in London society, she used it as a talisman for the entire first season. It was meant to show her affection for her dead brother, but it also conferred upon her the respectability she needed to secure. Moreover, the dress became a kind of trademark, something that was closely associated with her in the public mind and that made her easily recognized. Her image in black was therefore a contributing factor to her success.

Her name was however her most powerful symbol, and she became a legend in her time and to this day. In 1978, her story was dramatised in 13 episodes in a television series simply called Lillie, released in DVD in 2000.12 In 1851, John Ruskin wrote in The Stones of Venice that “the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance” (Ruskin 72), but in 1865 he chose the title Sesame and Lilies for one of his most popular books, supporting the conventional representation of men and women as belonging to the public and private sphere, respectively (cf. Ramos 164).13 He was an early visitor to Mrs Langtry’s house when he was Slade Professor of Art at the University of Oxford. He went there one afternoon with Oscar Wilde, and she recalls in her memoirs that he smiled at her, talked with enthusiasm on Greek art and vehemently denounced the Japanese style (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 87).

At this time, 1877, Lillie’s good friend Whistler was bringing a libel suit against Ruskin, who had reacted to his “Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket” by saying he was flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face (87-88). Only years later would Ruskin compare the “Jersey Lily” to

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12 After her sixtieth birthday, in 1913, Lillie agreed to star under the direction of pioneer film-maker D. W. Griffith in her first and only film role (cf. <http://www.divasthesite.com/Society_Divas/lillie_langtry_a.htm>). The comedy-drama His Neighbour’s Wife opened in New York’s Lyric Cinema and had good reviews (cf. Hillsdon 113).

13 For an overview of the concept of the two spheres and its current reinterpretation, see Shiman 64-71 and Mitchell 201-219, respectively.
Jezebel, saying that beautiful women like her held the fortunes of the world in their hands to make or mar (cf. Ellmann 109).

As for Oscar Wilde, in 1892 he would write Lady Windermere’s Fan for her (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 59-60). In the 1870s, when he was in his early twenties, he offered Lillie a copy of the poem “The New Helen”, bound in white vellum, with the inscription “To Helen, formerly of Troy, now of London” (Beatty 140). In the heyday of his popularity, Oscar Wilde was called “The Apostle of the Lily,” both for his worship of Mrs Langtry and aestheticism. Gilbert and Sullivan made a parody of it in Patience (1881), where people could listen to the following lines: “You will rank as an apostle / In the high aesthetic band, / As you walk down Piccadilly / With a poppy or a lily / In your mediaeval hand” (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 57).

Although the lily was one of the symbols of aestheticism, according to the conventional floral codes within Victorian culture, the lily represented spiritual love whereas physical love was represented by the sunflower. The language of flowers enabled people to send coded messages via floral gifts and allusions (Gates 231). It was emblematic of feelings and ideas, and it constituted a metalanguage to those who shared it (Waters 118). In 19th century literature, for instance, female characters were often compared to flowers and children were generally referred to as daisies.15

The “Jersey Lily” was discovered by the artists that belonged to a slightly bohemian and alternative world, but who made it possible for her to get acquainted with practically all the well-born and well-known men and women of the day. She deliberately used her beauty as a social strategy and as a means to gain entry into the fin de siècle circles, ruled by the highly

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14 The poem was first published in Time in July 1879. Laura Beatty makes an interesting point by saying that part of Wilde’s fascination for her was due to the fact that she combined the feminine and the masculine: “Lillie, though she played the goddess so well, had more than a touch of tantalizing androgyny. (...) She had a frankness about her and a boyish grace. And yet she was a woman” (Beatty 141).

15 Images of girlhood represented “the quintessence of Victorian femininity” (Gorham 37).
structured rituals and codes of etiquette required by a “respectable society” (Thompson 109).

Many women were celebrated for their looks, but being a Professional Beauty was not for all. The term professional meant nothing more than acknowledged, and they were actually unpaid models for painters and for photographers (cf. Beatty 55). Professional Beauties were a phenomenon of London’s society; no social event could be a success without them, and a good thing about being one of them was that they were not expected to pay back the hospitality of their hosts.

PBs mentioned in The Days I Knew include Patsy Cornwallis-West, who became Lillie’s best friend, Mrs Luke Wheeler, Lady Dudley, Lady de Grey, the Viscountess Mandeville and the Duchess of Leinster, all of them young and married. They all wondered who Mrs Langtry was, and gossip only stopped when they were told that her father was the Dean of Jersey and a friend of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and that her husband was a gentleman who had shipping interests and an income mainly derived from inherited Irish land.

To be friendly with royalty was the key to success. She had first met Prince Leopold, Queen Victoria’s favoured son, who became one of her admirers, and then his sister, her Royal Highness Princess Louise, both of them patrons of the arts. The last step for full acceptance in Society and, mainly, to rise as a PB, was to meet the Prince of Wales and then his wife, Princess Alexandra (see Beatty vii). Lillie Langtry’s crown of glory was to be presented at Court to Queen Victoria (cf. Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 63-66). It had all been prepared by Lady Conyngham, who had an official position in the Queen’s household, but it is likely that the arrangements for the presentation were made at the request of the heir to the throne.

When her role as a royal favourite went public, Lillie became the acknowledged queen of the Professional Beauties (Langtry Days I Knew: Autobiography 44). Social convention condemned female adultery, but strict codes of morality were easily forgotten when a fairy tale came true. This is the reason why the story of the prince and the lily was so appealing to popular imagination. It encouraged the idea that every Cinderella would eventually conquer her Prince Charming.
Lillie Langtry was not an ordinary Professional Beauty. She was the first Diva, a media star created by her new-found friends, the popular press and the Victorian public. She was “a model and a Muse” (Beatty 64), not only for artists and photographers, but for all social ranks and new sections of the market. She was also considered a trendsetter to be copied by all women who wanted to be fashionable. Shopkeepers were therefore happy to supply the demand for “the Langtry Hat”, “Langtry Shoes”, and so on.

The more Lillie Langtry became known, the better she would sell. In fact, examples of Lillie Langtry memorabilia are still being produced to this day. She used her powerful image to endorse commercial products, cosmetics in general and soap in particular, as the caricature from Punch in December 1890 shows – the soap box in which she sits being not only an allusion to the Millais painting “Bubbles” but to real soap.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, images flooded British popular culture. Late-Victorian spectators and/or consumers were drawn

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17 Even in her mid-forties, her diminutive waist still set the pattern for great beauty, as proved by a photograph for Lafayette in 1899 (see Beatty viii).
19 See “Product Promotion” <http://www.hurstmereclose.freeserve.co.uk/html/product_promotion.html>. In 1881, she agreed for the sum of £132, her weight in lbs, to give her name to a full page advertisement in The Illustrated London News for Pears Soap (see Hillsdon 72-73).
21 In the mid-1880s, Thomas J. Barratt, a member of the Pears family who became known as the father of advertising, bought Millais’ painting and used it on the mass production of posters, after inserting into a copy of the painting a bar of soap stamped with the word “Pears.” For Anne McClintock’s text “Soap and Commodity Culture”, see Hall 280-282. For soap used as a vehicle for imperial advertising, see Hall 241-242.
22 For a discussion of the Victorian period as having witnessed the arrival of mass visual culture, see Ryan 215-239. For the developments in marketing and advertising in women’s magazines, see Beetham 157-165.
into a visual language, i.e., into certain images that worked as systems of representation and signifying practices. Advertising, a new concept of the production of images for sale and for commercial purposes, emerged as the main cultural form of commodity capitalism (cf. Richards). It translated things into signs and symbols, and soap specifically meant a capacity to cleanse and purify. By the 1890s, Victorians were consuming 260,000 tons of soap a year, a commodity associated in the public mind with Pears. It actually became one of the first commodities to shift from small businesses to mass production. Thus, culture, art and aesthetics became entangled in commerce, economy and money.

In *The Days I Knew*, Lillie confessed to have sold, for a very large sum, the monopoly of her photographs to Napoleon Sarony, the principal publicity photographer in New York (73). However, she was keen on denying the materialistic image that people probably had of her:

Money has never had an exaggerated value in my eyes, nor have I counted on it for happiness. I have considered the ups and downs of life as the hills and vales of experience, and learned early to accept the unluckiest turns of Dame Fortune's wheel with equanimity. Besides, it is really surprising to find, in moments of pecuniary difficulty, that one can do without many things which habit had made seem indispensable, and how little money is needed to keep body and soul together. (*Days I Knew: Autobiography* 94)

Her outstanding beauty had always aroused tremendous public interest, and she certainly had the ability to adapt to circumstances and to overcome adversity. In 1881, when the Langtryrs went bankrupt, Lillie started a theatrical career. She was the first lady of society to go on the stage. Many people went to the theatre just to see her, and she promoted her own company in plays of her own choice in sell-out tours across Britain and America. In

23 According to the modern cultural studies approach, “the embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted is what we mean by ‘the practices of representation’” (Hall 10).

24 Tracy C. Davis mentions Lillie Langtry, her enduring popularity, and the existence of grades of respectability arising out of social background among actresses (cf. Davies 73).
1887, she became an American citizen, and in the same year divorced her husband in California.

After Edward Langtry’s death, Lillie married Hugo de Bathe, a baronet’s son nineteen years her junior, and became the Lady de Bathe in 1907. Two years later, she wrote *All at Sea*, a novel inspired by her own experiences in life (cf. Beatty 167, 231). She accomplished more than a woman of her time could expect, including a title, fame, fortune, and independence. As Shakespeare said, “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, II. vii. 139-140). It was probably not a coincidence that Rosalind, “Shakespeare’s versatile heroine” (Langtry *Days I Knew: Autobiography* 105) in *As You Like It*, was her favourite role (cf. Beatty vii), one in which she could act as a female character who disguised herself as a man, Ganymede, who in his turn also played the role of Rosalind, in a complex gender role reversal.

Shakespeare also wrote that “To gild refined gold, to paint the lily, / To throw a perfume on the violet, / (…) To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish, / Is wasteful and ridiculous excess” (*King John*, IV. ii. 11-12, 15-16). His words fit Emilie Charlotte Le Breton like a glove. Today, the perception of the “Jersey Lily” brings into our mind not only a tangled web of Victorian celebrities, but also a stream of timeless ideas, images, and symbols.

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25 The punning title illustrated its light-hearted mood, the plot hinged on mistaken identities, and the novel brought her in royalties of £1,200 (cf. Hillsdon 110-112). In 1916 she met the writer Somerset Maugham. His memories of that meeting were published in 1949 in *A Writer’s Notebook* (114-115).

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Further Reading


The Empire on Film: Recasting India from the Raj revival to *Lagaan*

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The Empire on Film: Recasting India from the Raj revival to Lagaan

In his essay “Outside the Whale” (1984), Salman Rushdie positions a “revisionist enterprise” at the heart of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain endeavouring the “refurbishment of the Empire’s tarnished image” (Rushdie 91). Incorporated in this venture are media of Raj nostalgia such as the television and filmic productions of *The Far Pavilions* (Duffell et al.), *The Jewel in the Crown* (Morahan et al.), *Gandhi* (Attenborough) and *A Passage to India* (Lean). In these “phantom twitchings” of what Rushdie identifies as the “amputated limb” of Empire he discerns a fantasy which “encourages many Britons to turn their eyes nostalgically to the lost hour of their precedence” (“Outside Whale” 92).

The writer is indisputably correct to draw a connection between Raj nostalgia and the ideological framework of Thatcher’s Britain; however this correlation may involve not only a determination to breathe life into former achievements, but also an apparently morbid fascination with current decline (Huggan 114). If the Raj revival was promoting nostalgia for a lost imperial prestige, it was doing so, like the heritage film more generally, in an ambivalent way. As John Hill argues, films such as *Heat and Dust* (Ivory) and others mentioned earlier “do not straightforwardly endorse the empire but reveal a liberal concern to show up its idiocies, injustices, and, to a limited extent, even its brutalities” (99). Nonetheless, while (sometimes ostensibly) debunking imperial glories and being evidence for an ironic awareness of their own belated status, these fictions are in the end accused in “Outside the Whale” of being little more than “artistic counterparts to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain” (Rushdie 92), marketing money-making imperial myths (Huggan 112).

One of those myths, as Rushdie exposes, is that the British Empire was “in spite of all its flaws and meanness and bigotries, fundamentally glamorous” (Rushdie “Outside Whale” 101). This view was recently taken
up by the British Asian comedian and writer Meera Syal in a sketch from the BBC’s satirical series *Goodness Gracious Me* (Wood, 2000) where heritage visual and thematic characteristics of *The Jewel in the Crown* are parodied and taken into the realms of caricature. Impersonating the character of Lady Chatterjee, Syal overturns the rape-plot current in Raj revival narratives, according to which “frail English roses were in constant sexual danger from lust-crazed wogs” (Rushdie “Outside Whale” 101), and highlights the trope of British sexual awakening in exotic foreign countries. While describing her assault by young British fusiliers, chained to a gate, she cannot help but speak over images reminiscent of heritage iconography such as colonial mansions, parties at the governor’s house, well-trimmed gardens and well-groomed officers. These were “wonderful days” regardless of the “hullabaloo” made by the founding fathers of the Indian subcontinent, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. On the one hand, this parody relies precisely on the audience’s familiarity with the specific style of filmmaking characteristic of Raj screen fictions; on the other hand, it reasserts that “the jewel in the crown is made, these days, of paste” (Rushdie “Outside Whale” 92).

Rushdie’s argument, in line with his other polemical writings, is hyperbolic and indiscriminate towards works of varying quality. Nevertheless, while debatable, his essay serves a useful function in highlighting the implications of contemporary revisionist narratives that rework imperial themes (Huggan 112), which is my aim to examine here. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the repercussions of the Raj revival in British cinema in its specific sociohistorical context. Of special interest to me in this reconstructive historiography is the fact that such recourse to “historical” fantasy has been seen as an instance of a neo-colonial othering process, by which heritage, “transformed into an exotic cultural spectacle, becomes a packageable commodity for metropolitan consumption” (Huggan 115).

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1 *Goodness Gracious Me*, series 2, episode 3, 0:04:20-0:05:51.

2 In this respect Hill writes that if “the Raj films indulge a taste for a glamorous imperial past, they also open up to the Western gaze the exotic ‘otherness’ of the Orient in which its characters are placed” (Hill 103).
At this point, I would like to focus on the critical controversy surrounding heritage cinema. By the end of the Thatcherite decade the term heritage had been tainted by a negative connotation since most studies of British film connected the industry and its re-enactment of the past with the preservation of national identity promoted by the New Right regime. While generally admitting the important role heritage films played in the revival of British cinema, critical surveys of British culture in the 1980s like Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture (1991) emphasize a certain contamination of heritage culture by conservative ideology. One crucial point critics make in Enterprise and Heritage is that heritage films became part of the decade’s marketing craze, turning the British past into a commodity to be sold as a sightseeing attraction in organised tours of old architectural landmarks and as a cultural product in films and television.

This recreation of a colonial British past or, in other words, this exoticisation of colonial history has also been looked at as suggestive of a loss-of-identity feeling, generated by the continuing trauma of the break-up of Empire and translated into aggressive nationalism and increased isolation from the European community. Analysing the nostalgia for an idealized, counterfeit British past, Tana Wollen voices the general opinion that the increasing racial and cultural diversity characterising post-World War II Britain, in exile from its most important colony, generated a need among conservative elements of the British population to look at history as the preserver of national identity: “the Right has had a singular project: to incorporate everyone under the same category, to render multitudes as one and the same, not as a straggled set of others. History is to be about nationhood” (Wollen 181).

Along the same line, Cairns Craig wrote that the success of heritage films such as A Passage to India is “symptomatic of the crisis of identity through which England passed during the Thatcher years” (10). Entitled

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3 Wollen further stresses the status of Raj screen fictions as consumer commodities in the early 1980s by relating them to the growing interest in museums and to the increase of tour operators offering package holidays to India (192). The author traces this increase “from fifteen in 1979 to seventy by 1984” (Guardian 7 April 1984, cited in Wollen 192).
“Rooms Without a View,” Craig’s essay suggests that despite most of these films’ dealing with the crossing of borders between cultures, in the end, the main characters always withdraw into the “barricaded room” of their own English upper-class identities. As the critic protests, the negative effect of this phenomenon is twofold: if “for an international audience, the England these films validate and advertise is a theme park of the past, then for an English audience they gratify the need to find points of certainty within English culture” (10). Thus, the films become marketable both internationally – due to their apparent ethnic openness – and nationally, due to their final validation of Englishness. The English past is, on the one hand, ruthlessly objectified for the international market; on the other hand, it is racially and ethnically purified to encourage identification with mainstream culture for an increasingly diverse audience in post-imperial Britain.

Here I follow Claire Monk who counters an initially strong critical attack against heritage film’s supposed backwardness, both aesthetic and political, reactions which came primarily from leftist film criticism in Britain. Regarding the visual nostalgia which presumably undercuts the social critique embedded in heritage films, Monk suggests that the pleasure of distancing from the past exceeds that of identifying with it. She argues for a prevailing liberalism in heritage films by showing that her personal viewing experience of these films has been radically different from those of its detractors: “Where Wollen writes of an (abstract) group of films which ‘yearn for a nation in which social status is known and kept,’ my own memories of the heritage films are of romances in which boundaries of status, nationality or gender are transgressed” (122).

Showing that the construction of Englishness as an all-encompassing identity is consistently undermined in the British productions is outside the reach of this paper and has already merited sufficient critical attention.4 One of the goals of this paper is to detach the term heritage from its negative

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associations with the ideological endorsement of a nationalistic political agenda which some critics have considered intrinsic in these films’ “faithful” and “nostalgic” recreation of the British imperial past. I base my argument on two assumptions which inform my reading of both British and Indian cinematic returns to the imperial past: the India portrayed in the Raj revival is as much an imagined one as the India Rushdie has created through his writings,⁵ and heritage cinema is an international art form which can be dissociated from the Thatcherite ethos.

The first assumption that offers itself relates to the fact that, in a way, Rushdie is involved in his own form of a recasting of India through his literature and non-fictional writing. Surely the India imagined by Rushdie is unlike the India in The Far Pavilions given that it is, fundamentally, about difference.⁶ While this is true, I would also argue that the writer participates, as well, in “the spectacularisation of a cultural otherness that is projected out in mythicised space and back in fictional time” (Huggan 115). Midnight’s Children (Rushdie) is a clear example of this in its construction of, to borrow Ronald Inden’s term, an “Imagined India”. Saleem, the protagonist, is not just the recorder of his nation’s history: he sees himself as an active agent who influences, creates, and controls the events that unfold in that history.


⁵ At this point, I would like to acknowledge the generalization implied by the use of the concept of India as homogenous unit. However, I do not wish it to be indicative of the homogenised perception of the oriental space identified by Said in Orientalism. In this respect, Spivak wrote: “‘India’, for people like me, is not really a place with which they can form a national identity because it has always been an artificial construct. ‘India’ is a bit like saying ‘Europe’” (Spivak, Gayatri (1990) The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, ed. Sarah Harasym, London and New York: Routledge, 39, quoted in D’Souza and Shakur, 84).

⁶ This desire for a new account of experience that will overthrow and subdue the imperial model is voiced by one of the characters of Shame when he protests against the scrutinizing of India: “Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! (…) Poacher! Pirate! We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?” (Rushdie Shame 28).
This will thus respond, to a certain extent, to Rushdie's accusations that films such as *A Passage to India* and *Gandhi* attempt to promote a false, idyllic image of the colonial past as historic reality. No matter what images are on display, these films do not offer them as the ultimate reality. In fact, while attempting to perform history, heritage films are also aware of their inability to re-create the past and are as much about the failure of representation as *Midnight's Children* is.7

Moving on to my second premise, situating heritage cinema in an international context will allow me to show that it is itself clearly a transnational phenomenon. Heritage cinema has become synonymous with Britishness mostly because the rise of this filmmaking mode in Britain coincided with and was crucial to the revival of British cinema in the early 80s. Heritage films have been criticised for offering the world a false image of Britishness, which presumably subsumes all national and racial identities in Britain, obliterating any other cultural points of identification. Even so, heritage is in fact an international film “genre,” developed independently on several continents. Consequently, the spectatorial pleasure in observing and deciphering the past, usually linked by the detractors of heritage films such as Rushdie with nostalgic longings for Britain’s colonial history, may in fact be thoroughly dissociated from a nationally bound context. As Martin Hipsky observes, unlike the British, the American public may enjoy heritage film’s spectacular rendition of history guilt-free:

> In many ways, these historical films function to efface the very social history they purport to portray; they provide North American viewers with a kind of sanitized, guilt-free nostalgia. It is, after all, the historical landscape of our trans-Atlantic cousins there on the screen, and while we are aware of empire and class injustices hovering somewhere beyond the movies’ immediate social landscape, they trouble us not, as they do not signify any dirty historical laundry of our own. (Hipsky 106)

Clearly, more than gratifying the British yearning for an upper class, colonial history, heritage cinema transcends national and ethnic boundaries.

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7 Moreover, for the purposes of the current paper I would like to emphasize the fact in which writers like Rushdie, who are credited as providing an “inside view” of various Third World countries, write for a clearly Western target audience.
Interestingly for my purposes, Indian cinema has been receptive to the heritage mode of filmmaking: directed by Ashutosh Gowariker in 2001 and well-received internationally, *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* can be best described as a Bollywood, sing-and-dance heritage film. Set in late nineteenth century in Victorian India, in 1893, *Lagaan* centres on the struggle of a dusty small village – Champaner – to cope both with drought and with British occupation. After prolonged lack of rain, the villagers cannot pay the land tax – the *lagaan* – imposed by the British government from their annual crop. The peasants’ spirited leader – Bhuvan, played by Bombay superstar Aamir Khan – accepts a sporting challenge thrown down by the arrogant commander of the local British cantonment, Captain Russell, who offers to exempt them from the punitive taxes provided they beat the British in a game of cricket. If the locals succeed to master the game in just a few short months and win, there will be no land tax for three years, but if they lose, the entire region will have to pay triple tax. As none of the Indians knew how to play the game, the film continues as the typical underdog story, in which the villagers’ team finally wins, with substantial help from the British officer’s sister who falls in love with the Indian leader.

Gowariker’s film meets the visual and thematic criteria of heritage cinema, including a certain stress on the idea of national identity. The fact that it is beautifully photographed, carefully recreating the period atmosphere of both Indian and British quarters, and displaying lavish landscapes and exuberant colours, led a critic to draw a comparison between this film and *A Passage to India*: “like David Lean, director Ashutosh Gowariker is not shy about lingering on ancient forts and palaces, vast plains and the birthday-cake architecture of the British Raj, so out of place and yet so serenely confident” (Ebert 359). As a matter of fact, in the context of Bollywood films, the visual splendours which are a trademark of the heritage style are rather innovative ways of addressing audiences. In keeping with the parallel with heritage cinema, *Lagaan* seems to be an Indian replica of *Chariots of Fire*: Bhuvan assembles a team of eleven men, including representatives of various ethnic groups, such as Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, and social castes, together with a village sweeper from the untouchable caste, and even the English lady which contribute to the final victory of the Indian team.

A detailed study of the film is outside the range of this paper so the
focus will rest on the interplay between revision and revival. I shall examine *Lagaan*’s representation of British India and its reversal of the exoticisation of colonial history – or should I risk saying, self-exoticisation – while hoping to show that this film cannot be read as something of a riposte to the revivalism of Raj films, in the same way as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears) was.\(^8\) In fact, I do not think that *Lagaan* can be seen as a subversive response to the long history of expeditions characteristic of the Raj revival. As Jane Jacobs reminds us, it is “a revisionary form of imperialist nostalgia that defines the colonised as always engaged in conscious work against the core” (Jacobs, 1996: 15). In the film the encounter between East and West is revisited but the context is upturned mainly through the use of cricket as the contact zone to which I will now draw my attention.

According to reviewers, *Lagaan*’s success in India resulted from the combination of two Indian obsessions: the colonial past and cricket. In *The Tao of Cricket*, Ashis Nandy explains that cricket, one of the most exemplary cultural and aesthetic categories inherited from colonialism, operated according to a Victorian model in which cultivated style and carefully defined notions of sportsmanship, dash, courage, temperament and grace under pressure worked to keep most people out of the sport. It was a “gentleman’s” game and the perfect expression of the values of the Victorian upper classes in England (Appadurai 91).

The moral worth of cricket was also related to its supposed antiquity (Williams 15). Nonetheless, Nandy refers to this former village pastime of

\(^8\) As Hanif Kureishi explains, in his introduction to the script of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, he “was tired of seeing lavish films set in exotic locations;” it seemed to him “that anyone could make such films, providing they had an old book, a hot country, new technology, and were capable of aiming the camera at an attractive landscape in the hot country in front of which stood a star in a perfectly clean costume delivering lines from the old book” (Kureishi 5). *My Beautiful Laundrette* self-consciously makes use of actors such as Saeed Jaffrey and Roshan Seth who appeared in both *A Passage to India* and *Gandhi*. Conversely, Daniel Day-Lewis, who played the skinhead Johnny in *My Beautiful Laundrette* appears as a racist thug in the opening scenes of *Gandhi*. For further connections between Raj revival cinema and Kureishi’s films see Moore-Gilbert, B. *Hanif Kureishi*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002: 73-106.
aristocratic English amateurs as “an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English” (Nandy 1). According to the critic, there are mythic structures beneath the surface of the sport that make it profoundly Indian in spite of its Western historical origins. Arjun Appadurai understands the indigenization of cricket somewhat differently: “cricket became indigenized through a set of complex and contradictory processes that parallel the emergence of an Indian ‘nation’ from the British Empire;” moreover, “indigenization is often a product of collective and spectacular experiments with modernity, and not necessarily of the subsurface affinity of new cultural forms with existing patterns in the cultural repertoire” (Appadurai 90).

For the villagers in *Lagaan* the cricket match gives them an opportunity to defeat the local representatives of their colonial overlords. Here the celebratory moments of colonial experience from the point of view of the colonised are framed as a sly mimicry of an imperial sport where the subaltern initially imagine cricket to be no more than the *gollı danda* – a well-known Indian rustic game, also played with a stick and ball –, which could have been devised to illustrate Nandy’s thesis, and then begin to recognize its complex rules and power.9

As tropes, the cricket images in *Lagaan* juxtapose the aristocratic sport of the colonialists with the colonised’s embrace of that sport as their own. Of particular interest here is Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, in which the colonised’s imitative performance of the coloniser’s culture undermines the authority of that culture. The critic argues for more subtle, discursive modes of resistance practised by colonised people: rather than mimesis providing proof of the realisation of the civilising intent of colonisation, it establishes a partial and distorted representation which menaces the coloniser more than it comforts.

In Bhabha’s understanding, the mimetic performance of the colonised subject – in which the colonised subject takes up the guise of the coloniser – subverts colonialism not because it might be a conscious act of (mis)

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9 The peculiar thing about the match in *Lagaan* is that the subaltern side wins but not before, as is the norm in Bollywood cinema, divine intercession is prayed for the night before the final day of the match (Mishra xix-xx).
appropriation, but because it has a menacing effect which is produced by colonialism’s own paranoia. According to the critic, the coloniser recognised his/her ambivalent situation, “tethered to, not confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of the colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his actions at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being” (Bhabha 44). In his essay “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Bhabha’s concern turns to the way in which colonial ambivalence produces hybridisation: hybridity is not just a mixing together, it is a dialogic dynamic in which certain elements of dominant cultures are appropriated by the colonised and rearticulated in dissident ways.

In keeping with the arguments presented in *Orientalism Transposed* (1998) by Julie Codeli and Dianne Macleod, I would argue that the liminal way through which the Indian villagers in *Lagaan* appropriate cricket, modifying it, is more a transposition than a subversion, given that a transposition is “carefully and subtly modulated and bespeaks the complex subterranean means by which colonized people were forced to express their needs, traditions, frustrations, limited power and circumscribed authority under British rule” (1).

Focusing on cricket in a postcolonial context, Appadurai’s essay “Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket” examines how this sport, and by the same token Englishness, has been shaped by India, and must perforce incorporate that hybrid reality into its own mirror image. The author investigates how “mass-mediated forms” have enabled cricket – once the repository of Englishness and a tool for colonization – to become a spectacular national passion that is central not only to the Indian imagination in the postcolonial Indian nation-state but also within certain imagined worlds of diasporic communities. Even as the game has functioned as an instrument for the assertion (and defense) of English-elite-male models of authority, the colonised have attempted to subvert or capture this authority, radically reinventing the terms of play.

In fact, as Simon Gikandi argues, cricket in the decolonizing world functions as a metaphor of conflict between old and new metropoles, and simultaneously provides marginal populations with the means of overcoming their marginality in global popular culture. The author states that “it was precisely because of the affinity between cricket and Englishness, between
the game and the idea of nationhood, that nationalists in India and the Caribbean were to posit their entry into the field of cricket as the mark of both their mastery of the culture of Englishness and their transcendence of its exclusive politics” (9). For this reason, Gikandi sees cricket as “the mark of the incomplete project of colonialism” since it allows “formerly colonized peoples to hallow new spaces of identity and self-expression and provide the metropolis with the alibi to reinvigorate its cultural traditions” (13).

Returning to Rushdie’s “Outside the Whale” will now help me cast a critical perspective on the connection between Lagaan and global popular culture. Commenting on Paul Scott’s The Raj Quartet, the author points out that “Indians get walk-ons, but remain, for the most part, bit-players in their own history. Once this form has been set, it scarcely matters that individual fictional Brits get unsympathetic treatment from their author. The form insists that they are the ones whose stories matter, and that is so much less than the whole truth that it must be called a falsehood” (90, [Rushdie’s italics]). Lagaan reverses the gaze: it is not the past experience of whites in India with which the film is concerned but rather the experiences of Indians in British India. From an Orientalist representation of India as exotic, exciting, seductive and mysterious in Raj narratives, India in Lagaan is recast ed as a nation colonised and suffering from acute poverty, a victim of political and economic oppression and exploitation. It is a nation facing a crisis and in need of help, to which the protagonist Bhuvan lends a hand albeit at village scale. However, does Lagaan really break away from Orientalism?

I would like to make a brief point about the representation of women in Lagaan to assist my argument. As in contemporary rightwing nationalism, the film’s women support the nation as mothers, wives and lovers. The only independent female role in the film is reserved for the non-native white memsahib, a possible stand-in for Annie Besant and other memsahibs who took up the Nationalist cause.  

10 The trope of young white women coming to India occupies the central space of Lagaan as it did earlier in Raj screen

10 In an interview Rachel Shelley, the actress playing the Captain’s sister, admitted to having read “a lot of history and depictions of India by Victorian women at that time” (Hastings and Bisset).
fictions. In both narratives, British Indian heterosexual relationships are depicted as the outcome of the fascination of the white British woman towards the exoticism and mystery of India, which presumably makes middle-class English domesticity seem by contrast dull and unappealing. Discussing these relations in the context of *A Passage to India* and *Heat and Dust*, Muraleedharan states what could also apply to *Lagaan*: that the disruptive and alienating “feminine” is assigned the responsibility of betraying the “masculine” and thereby brings about the decline of the Empire (158).

Thus India appears in both *Lagaan* and Raj narratives as a mysterious force that seduces and assaults English women, in a way revitalising Orientalist representations of India as the exotic Other. So, if there is recasting, as in changing the cast or putting something into a new form, of cultural and national identities in *Lagaan*, it seems to me that this process is far more complex than a clear-cut reversing of the gaze mentioned in advance. As Saadia Toor notes, Indians today are turning the Orientalist gaze back upon themselves (13). She is worth quoting at some length:

> [U]nlike previously, when it was the space of the exotic Other and cultural commodities which signified this space were consumed mainly in the Western hemisphere, India is no longer a passive node in this political economy of desire. If Orientalism past was a manifestation of the “Occident’s” will to power over “the Orient”, the *New* Orientalism rehearses the same relationship but with a crucial difference: today the production-circulation-consumption circuit in the case of these cultural commodities originates and culminates in *India*. (Toor 8-9, [Toor’s italics])

As a result, *Lagaan* raises serious issues about the nature of a globalised world since, for many years, globalisation has been regarded as a euphemism for Western cultural domination. Indeed, Bollywood can be seen as playing an important role in the construction of an Indian identity to both those within India and those in the Indian diaspora, testing “Indian values” across the transnational Indian family, concurrently exporting and consuming exotica.¹¹

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Discussions about *Lagaan* as a cultural phenomenon often deal exclusively with the recognition of Hindi films in Europe and the United States (Runkle 47). Nevertheless, must we not re-examine this cultural process in the light of increasing Indian influences penetrating mainstream culture and argue that globalisation allows these influences to travel backwards and forwards, threatening the perceived pre-eminence of Western popular culture?

In *Indian Cinema: The Bollywood Saga* (2004), Dinesh Raheja and Jitendra Kothari discuss this paradigm shift: “In the new millennium, Hindi cinema has generated a creative milieu conductive to taboo-trashing experimentation. No longer insular, the industry confidently talks today of ‘crossover’ films that will compete with western films. (...) Today Hindi cinema is far more confident about the opening up of porous cultural borders” (Raheja and Kothari 133). Partaking this argument, Cary Rajinder-Sawhney, cultural diversity manager for the British Film Institute, stated during an interview that

*Lagaan* is the first commercial Indian film to seek to cross over between the two cultures. It is based on a story which would be of interest in Britain but it is also a very mature, confident Indian film which tells the story of the colonial era from an Indian point of view. In many ways it reflects the increasing overlap between India and the West as [India] becomes a more hi-tech and diverse economy. (Milmo)

*Lagaan* might well be Bollywood’s first crossover hit as Rachel Dwyer remarked upon the film’s British release:

On the one level, the film sticks to the Bollywood ‘formula’ – a hero in a love triangle, a villain, songs and dances. But at the same time Lagaan breaks through the traditional boundaries of Hindi film. In India the film’s historical background, lack of a star heroine, village background and folk-style music were all seen as problematic. Yet it proved one of the greatest critical and commercial successes of recent years. (Chapman 352)

I would like to conclude by returning to one of the issues addressed within this paper namely the ways in which a new Orientalism, different from Orientalism defined as a corporate Western institution for dealing with the Orient (Said 3), is articulated and used within the global cultural industry through Bollywood films such as *Lagaan*. As Stuart Hall suggests, making sense of one’s roots is not an unproblematic exercise: “There can
be no simple ‘return’ or ‘recovery’ of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present; no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of the traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present” (Hall 448). Lagaan takes on colonialism, the caste system and colonial desire but Gowariker, by subtitling the film “once upon a time in India,” conjures up a fairy tale – and a crowd-pleasing one at that – as much as anything else.

Bibliography


Filmography


When Photography became Art.
Julia Margaret Cameron
and the Woman’s Mission

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She [Julia Cameron] was well aware of the growing conflict between commercial imperatives and artistic ideals, and when she turned to photography, she responded by taking great pains to distinguish and promote her work as fine art.


At the beginning of the 21st century many books, articles, seminars and university syllabi suddenly began to deal with a field that appeared to be a new area of study, that is, visual culture. However, it goes without saying that people have always visually sensed the world around them and such representations1 have always been of great importance in their lives. In fact, quoting Schirato and Webb “from the ancient Greek philosophers, through the art writers of the Renaissance and the aestheticists of the early Enlightenment, to the art historians, film critics and media theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people have studied visual forms and their meanings”. (1).

Bearing in mind that from my standpoint it is easy to understand that visuality has had, from olden times, a strong cultural and social impact we will analyse the ways Julia Margaret Cameron’s photography became art (or became perceived as art) and how in it the woman’s mission became visible. In fact, this is clear in the way we may include “as valid objects of the study

1 Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language, which enables us to refer to either the “real” world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (Hall 17).
of visual culture everything from the earliest cave drawings, to the architecture and statuary of the ancients; medieval, Renaissance and modern art; the advertising flyers in our mailboxes; skywriting; football colours; billboards and posters; television shows; dreams; CD covers; movies; the shape of cars and bicycles; and, of course all the visual aspects of digital communication technology” (Schirato and Webb 3-4). When considering Victorian Studies, we have to recognise that Victorian Visual Culture appears, at the present time, as a new field of research and Victorian photography, certainly, contributes to a better understanding of that period.

The mid-Victorian metropolis was an indulgent host to new forms of visual and literary culture. Technical developments in printing and the introduction of photography; fiscal changes to newspaper and periodical publishing; new forms of spectacular advertising; the rapid expansion of audiences and readerships; and the diversification of sites of urban leisure and entertainment all impacted on the Victorian city in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The experience of the city streets was shaped, in part, by these new aspects of urban culture. Culture had been revolutionised; it was public, visible and unavoidable, but it was also powerful and potentially dangerous. (Mead 151)

Living in a time in which photography was expected to depict the world as it was, Cameron emphasised its blurry effects. This out of focus technique connected her style to the Pre-Raphaelite painting. In her writings on photography it is to be noticed that she was aware of the limitations of her technique but her soft focusing was a way of representing what was socially unnoticed. To a certain extent, there is a sort of manipulation of her technique as a way of creating new discourses on art. As Cameron’s photographs show us (nowadays we are able to see all her works in Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs edited in 2003 by Julian Cox and Colin Ford) her art was performative as “each photograph demanded careful and lengthy preparation, a judicious selection of properties, the artistic arrangement of draperies, much searching through literature for subjects and characters, the consultation of engravings for visual precedents, and not a little inspiration from tableaux vivants and private theatricals.” (Cherry 167).

Actually, technical problems worried her and we know she used to attend the Photographic Society of London meetings in order to overcome
the difficulties caused by the collodion. (Olsen 217). This concern shows us that her soft focusing corresponded to an option, which made the expression of her artistic mind possible. Though it is adequate to consider Julia Cameron either as an amateur or as a professional photographer, in fact she was able not only to maintain the love for her activity but also to keep the desire to bring out an inner vision from her representations. Her intention was to elevate photography to the status of art, which was emphasised by the painterly effects she created. In general, her women’s faces suggest quietness, in some cases the contemplation of their own fate evoking what was then considered the woman’s mission. As a matter of fact, all over the Victorian period, art was used as an instrument of moral power that urged the viewers to reflect upon important social and cultural issues, both when we consider the Pre-Raphaelite painting, with its young painters revolted at the established art of the Royal Academy, or contemporary Victorian photography, in which Cameron, when challenging the conventional focus, represented what was then considered to be the woman’s mission.

For the sake of this paper, we will begin with John Everett Millais (1829-96), one of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who was never wholly involved with its aims. The subjects of purity, marriage and love interested Millais and The Bridesmaid can be compared to Julia Cameron’s The Bride and The Angel in the House. If Coventry Patmore described in his poem “The Angel in the House”\(^2\) an idealised courtship, in fact his idealised Angel came to be the symbol of every Victorian woman, daughter or wife, who created a restful home to her family. Actually, this Angel was a repressed woman who was only allowed to act in the domestic sphere, as Man at Window, Girl in Chair (c. 1861),\(^3\) a photography from Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865) clearly illustrates. In it, we perceive the double standard for men and women as emphasised by the young lady’s submissive look. At the time marriage was considered as the dream of every young woman, and in

\(^2\) The poem “The Angel in the House” was published in four instalments from 1854 to 1862.

\(^3\) Lady Clementina Hawarden. Man at Window; Girl in Chair. (c. 1861). Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
order to achieve it women should always behave in an innocent way. Families made clear, in implicit and explicit manners, that their daughters should keep their innocence till marriage and the awareness of sexuality should be strongly repressed. Marriage was a sort of contract, a sexual one, according to Pateman’s words:

The social contract is a story of freedom; the sexual contract is a story of subjection. The original contract constitutes both freedom and domination. Men’s freedom and women’s subjection are created through the original contract — and the character of civil freedom cannot be understood without the missing half of the story that reveals how men’s patriarchal right over women is established through contract. Civil freedom is not universal. Civil freedom is a masculine attribute and depends upon patriarchal right. (2)

Indeed some research on the spreading of the ideas and works of the Pre-Raphaelites and how they entered popular discourse can be seen in *Punch* parodies and, to a certain extent, some of these representations became cultural signifiers of female sexuality. Thus, when viewing *The Bridesmaid* and *The Bride* we notice differences relating to the ways Millais and Cameron treated the women represented.

Though *The Bridesmaid* can be viewed as a symbol of innocence, her luxuriant hair and the phallic symbolism of the sugar caster represent her mixed feelings in relation to her own sensuality, notwithstanding the orange blossom on her dress which may be understood as a symbol of chastity. In the painting we see an old superstition which states that if the bridesmaid passes a small piece of the wedding cake through her ring nine times, she will have a vision of her future. On doing this the bridesmaid might be

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wondering if she were to find love and not just a marriage based on appearances. Indeed, young men could have pre-marital relationships before they sobered down to a stable married life for society used to forgive their affairs with a wrong woman, i.e., a fallen one, before they settled down with a virginal young lady.

When linking 21st century issues on gender with the painting by Millais, we are led to many Victorian wedded ladies whose marriage was due to material contracts, which in turn led to keep their subordination. In theory, men were expected to remain faithful to their wives but their faithfulness allowed the occasional visit to fallen woman, that is, a prostitute. Women who abided by the woman’s mission principles were socially respected even though it was easy to transgress the social code. Peter Cominos points out that men were happy with either “sexless ministering angels or sensuously oversexed temptresses of the evil. “ (Cominos 167). In spite of the prostitution theme being represented in several Pre-Raphaelite paintings, for example, in Found by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, we tend to see women who are forgiving men and not the other way round.

Thus, the situation as painted by Rossetti was not a common one in Victorian society. Once a woman deviated from what was then considered to be her right behaviour, the unforgiving society excluded her. In fact, we recognise a woman ridden with shame while a man, perhaps someone who had wished to marry her in the past, is holding her hand. She is a fallen woman confronted with her innocent past, a modern

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moral subject that was present in urban settings, but actually we do not know if she is accepting redemption or really unable to escape her fate.\textsuperscript{6}

With her coarse curly hair in a bun, her eyes dark and deep, her head upturned, as if she were looking to the heavens or perhaps listening in subservience, Peacock looks delicate and ethereal. (…) Her shoulders slump and there is a hint of a furrow in her brow that makes her seem burdened, fragile, like one more in need of care than able to dispense it. (Wolf 47)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{\textit{The Angel in the House} (1873) represents the idealised woman’s mission. In spite of the fact that we consider the majority of Victorian women were hidden behind men’s identities (fathers, brothers, husbands), art, namely photography, gave to some of them a kind of immortality. Cameron’s male sitters were predominantly figures of intellectual greatness contrasting with the female ones who were mostly beautiful and, except for her niece Julia\textsuperscript{7}.

\textsuperscript{6} Rossetti never finished the painting as he had difficulties in relation to perspective and drawing.

\textsuperscript{7} Julia Margaret Cameron. \textit{The Angel in the House}. Carbon print, 350 x 254 mm. The Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/> (January 2007).}
Jackson, rarely identified by their names but by what they represented. In that case, Emily Peacock is the sitter for *The Angel in the House* where she appears in three-quarter profile. The photograph was taken slightly from below in order to give special importance to the young woman’s distant looking and no details are to be seen in the background, which contributed to emphasise the subject. The eyes are at one-third line expressing the main subject represented and shadows appear to be softened by a reflector.

“Although the age of consent for women was twelve years old for much of the Victorian era, a woman’s wedding day was the day on which she truly passed from youth to womanhood” (Wolf 68). This feminine ideal, which represented women’s personality as noble and loving, can also be seen in Julia Cameron’s *The Bride* (1869) or *My Ewen’s Bride (God’s Gift to Us)*.8

This ideal corresponded to several books written to help women fulfilling their mission, for example the etiquette manuals from Sarah Stickney Ellis,

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a middle-class English woman who wrote on women’s role and responsibilities in society.\footnote{See Sarah Stickney Ellis. “Daughters of England” (1842), “Wives of England” (1843) and Mothers of England. (1844), in The Secret Works of Mrs. Ellis. S. l.: J. & H. G. Langley.} Moreover, a woman’s wedding represented her mission in life, in the case of The Bride (1869) it is really emphasised as it portrays Annie Chinery on the day of her marriage to Cameron’s son Ewen.

Actually, Cameron welcomed her daughter-in-law and in her representations we can see not only the artist’s emotions but also how “Cameron made the problems of early photographic technique into triumphant virtues.” (Olsen 217). As we can see the wet collodion that coated the glass negatives was smeared and “turn[ed] the wedding veil into a diaphanous cloud” (Olsen 217) which emphasised the Angel in the house role. With no details in the background in order to stress the importance of the subject, the representation is slightly lighted from behind above to spread across all the white dress. There are harsh shadows in the bride’s face contrasting with the angelical look of the young girl, which bring out the angel in the house features, the real woman’s mission. The direct eye contact drives also the viewer to the face to compensate the distracting effect of the large surface of the dress. The result as we can see is the representation of a bridal innocence. Both representations, The Bride and The Angel in the House have a centred framing and the whole space is filled by the subjects and seems to be lit from the right, certainly by artificial light.

In a tangled web of ideas, images and symbols related to representations of the woman’s mission, Julia Cameron shows the viewers that she was more interested in creating “an expressive interpretation of her subject than a highly detailed formal portrait” (Wolf 33). From her photographs and from what Julia Cameron wrote about them, namely in her autobiography, Annals of My Glass House (1874), we recognise that technical issues were not a priority to her. When many of her contemporaries were worried about the difficulties which wet-collodion glass negatives printed on albumen paper caused, she was able to turn this difficulty into a success. The same happened with the lenses she used inasmuch they had a short focal length, which was the cause of a progressive blurriness. However, she
decided to keep it when she changed to a long focal length lens. Critics have largely discussed the issue of focus but one has to recognise that Cameron’s choice corresponded to a creative vision, in which artistic issues were prioritised and the soft focus became her specific feature. Thus Julia Cameron was able to break with a photographic tradition that defended the improvement of technical devices and thus she contributed to elevate photography to the status of art.

References
Progress as a Problem for Historians of Ideas

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Progress as a Problem for Historians of Ideas

There are a number of different reasons why progress is a particularly difficult idea for historians of ideas or (as they are also called) intellectual historians. Let me start by listing the ones I am going to talk about:

i) progress as anachronism: concentrating on progress implies that there is only one possible outcome to the historical process, it implies a teleological interpretation of the past. There are two possible arguments one might be making here, but people don’t usually bother to distinguish them because they want, I think, to make both of them. The first is relatively uncontroversial: it is that one cannot foresee the future – when Pasteur and Pouchet became engaged in a dispute over spontaneous generation in 1860 nobody could be sure in advance which of them would triumph. And the second is that the future might have turned out very differently, that we live in only one of many possible worlds. If Pouchet had triumphed modern germ theory would have been postponed for years or even for decades. One might argue that one can conceive of worlds in which germ theory never establishes itself, in which what we think of as “modern” medicine never develops. This second argument seems to me much more problematic, and we may want to come back to it.

ii) progress as present-centeredness: the progress one looks for is defined from our point of view; but this may given one a completely false perspective. Let me take a simple example. Modern medicine relies to a considerable extent on blind randomized trials to determine the efficacy of new therapies. Looking back, historians have identified James Lind in the mid eighteenth century as the inventor of the randomized trial – but contemporaries didn’t think Lind had discovered anything important, and it is not clear that Lind himself thought he had; Lind’s importance derives from our backward projection of our interests onto earlier period. Similarly Bodin was long
celebrated as the discoverer of the modern theory of sovereignty – it comes as something of a shock to discover that contemporaries of Bodin’s generally didn’t notice that he was propounding a theory of sovereignty. Again, Bodin is being read anachronistically.

iii) progress as normal: a concentration on progress can lead one to ignore those things that don’t change. For an example of things that don’t change, one might take the constant presence of the classics in every field through to the end of the nineteenth century – in literature of Homer or Aeschylus; in political theory of Plato and Cicero; in medicine of Hippocrates and Galen. For a very long time (exactly when this ceases to be true varies from discipline to discipline) people thought of themselves as engaged in activities that were direct and valid extensions of activities performed in ancient Greece and ancient Rome. There are exceptions of course – new disciplines, such as political economy or chemistry, but I think we have a tendency to massively underestimate the continuing presence of the classical heritage, and we have a tendency to ignore just how traditional societies were before (say) the First World War.

iv) progress as welcome: we tend to massively underestimate resistance to change. This we often write of Locke as a founder of modern political theory, and of the eighteenth century as the age in which Locke was of enormous importance – and in the process we massively underestimate the extent to which people had either never heard of Locke’s political theory, or fundamentally disagreed with it.

v) progress as “real”: it is very easy to take for granted questions that need to be asked and answered – progress from what point of view, by whom, for what purpose. Let me give as an example the invention of the stethoscope in 1816, doctors still use stethoscopes to help them diagnose diseases, so the invention of the stethoscope looks like a fundamental advance, and is celebrated as such in histories of medicine. But in 1816 none of the diseases that the stethoscope was used to diagnose could actually be treated – so that the stethoscope didn’t actually save any lives or alleviate any suffering. In this important sense the stethoscope changed nothing – a fact which can be easily overlooked if one celebrates it as a step towards modern medicine. So too James Lind is supposed to have discovered how to treat scurvy with origins and lemons – but in fact most of his attempts at treatment were
unsuccessful because he processed the orange and lemon juice and destroyed the vitamin C in it. It’s easy to lose track of the fact that progress is often fitful, uncertain, and that one step forward can be followed by two steps back.

The first two of my list of five are fairly conventional concerns in the methodology of the history of ideas; the next three are not conventionally seen as problems of methodology, so I will now discuss first the problem of methodology and then what I will call for the moment “the other problems.”

Two authors are most commonly mentioned in methodological discussions of progress as a problem in intellectual history. The first is Herber Butterfield, who, many years ago, in 1932, wrote an attack on narratives of progress called *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Butterfield’s immediate target was a view of English history that saw it as being about the progress of liberty – a view invented by the Whig party in the eighteenth century. Butterfield’s book has given us a label, “Whig history”, which is now applied to all uncritical narratives of progress. Butterfield seems to have recognized that historians were bound to slip into such narratives, and happily slipped into them himself in many of his short books on big subjects, such as his book entitled *The Origins of Modern Science*. The alternative, he thought, was a sort of technical history that presented events as being the result of enormously complex processes, and described outcomes as being uncertain and unpredictable. Butterfield thought there were in effect two types of history: a bird’s eye view, which surveyed the past from the point of view of the present, and was necessarily biased and anachronistic; and a worm’s eye view, in which small things loomed large, and it was impossible to get one’s bearings. Professional historians, he thought, would always prefer the worm’s eye view.

The second author who is frequently discussed is Quentin Skinner, and what is called the “contextualist” history of ideas, an approach founded in the late ‘60s. Contextualism took its intellectual inspiration from J. L. Austin’s *How to do Things with Words*, and thus took expressions of ideas as actions designed to have an effect on a particular audience in a particular context. Hobbes thus wrote *Leviathan* to be read in the conditions of 1650s England, and to understand him one must work out what an intelligent and well-informed reader in the 1650s would have understood him to be doing. There are a number of problems with this approach. What about authors
who tend to be misunderstood by their contemporaries? (According to some interpretations of Hobbes, his contemporaries were wrong to understand him to be attacking religion.) What about authors who have a project they only partially reveal to their contemporaries? (Those who think that Hobbes was attacking religion have to attribute to him a set of beliefs and arguments that go beyond anything he put into print.)

Contextualism effectively eliminates progress by eliminating the long view – an author is “important” if he seemed important to contemporaries, not if he seems important a hundred years later, or to us. But in practice of course contextualism tends to break down. The authors that were most widely read in the seventeenth century are often of little interest to us now – we are much more interested in Hobbes than we are in Cardinal Bellarmine, though Bellarmine was far more influential and widely read at the time. In order to justify working on Hobbes rather than Bellarmine we have to introduce some anachronistic criterion of importance. One can see this in Skinner’s first book. His method was supposed to abolish anachronism, yet his title was *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* — which was to reintroduce precisely the anachronistic standard of significance that the methodology was supposed to reject.

In practice, therefore, neither Butterfield nor Skinner has been able to live up to their own methodological pronouncements, and the reason is simple – we write history which is of interest to us, and consequently the project of historical writing is of necessity anachronistic. We may take measures to control and limit that anachronism, but we cannot entirely eliminate it. Similarly we write history in our own language – we never simply express ideas from the past, but always redescribe them in our own terms. Again, we can seek to control and limit the resulting anachronism, but we cannot entirely eliminate it.

I want to turn now from the methodological issues, which are the ones on which attention normally focuses, to the other four issues, to which I think insufficient attention is normally paid. A number of very important books have tried to address problems of the sort I am outlining in this second group, but for the most part they have not been works of intellectual history. For example, the absence of change, the importance of continuity in key areas of life is brilliantly portrayed in Braudel’s Mediterranean, but it is
hard to think of an important work of intellectual history which places continuity at its heart. Similarly it is hard to think of a major work which is primarily about resistance, or primarily about demonstrating that change was far more illusory than real.

At this point I should stress that the way in which an historian has to face the question of progress varies greatly depending on what sort of history he or she is writing. The ordinary view is that there is something we can properly call progress in science – let us call it objective progress – and that it is therefore perfectly appropriate for histories of science to focus on discoveries and advances – although some strict contextualists have adopted an entirely relativistic approach even to science. In religion and politics we tend to accept that although we have strongly held preferences, those preferences are in some sense relative to the culture we live in. Thus although Protestant historians may approve of the Reformation and left-wing historians may approve of the extension of the franchise to the poor, both will concede that one can write history from other perspectives, and therefore that their standard of “progress” is in some degree culturally relative and that their views are bound to be contested. What you think amounts to progress in philosophy, or ethics, or literature is also likely to be highly contested, so anyone will recognize that any account of progress in these fields is somewhat partisan. To argue, for example, that “modern” philosophy begins with Locke is implicitly to attack both Aquinas and Descartes, and neoscholastics and Cartesians would inevitably disagree.

So clearly the idea of progress is more or less problematic in some fields than in others, and there can be a good deal of interesting disagreement about where it can be legitimately applied. Those who attack what they call the Enlightenment project want to argue that most of our ideas of progress are culturally relative, and that we employ them in order to justify an unjustified cultural imperialism; while anyone who thinks, for example, that eventually all societies will be capitalist and democratic is bound to find that this fundamental assumption will affect how they write history. The extent to which one has to take account of my second set of problems will depend in part on whether you are writing a history of mathematics or a history of views on contraception.

But I want to suggest that there is an underlying difficulty in trying to
think about progress that hasn’t been captured by my comments so far. It is often said that all literature involves only a certain number of plots – six I think. One can also recognize in literature certain pervasive forms – epic, comedy, tragedy, farce, etc. Hayden White famously argued that historians are inevitably trapped within literary forms, and I think this is a major reason for the difficulty we encounter if we try to do without the idea of progress. Most histories tell some sort of story, and if the story is to have a happy ending – if it is to be a comedy rather than a tragedy – it usually has to be cast as a story of progress. In part the problem of progress is a problem of literary form. Of course one might say that one doesn’t have to write comedies, one can write tragedies. But actually in intellectual history this is almost impossible – it would require us to argue that good ideas had been destroyed by bad ones, and the truth is that we think that this has rarely been the case. Gibbon could write about the triumph of Christianity as if it were a sort of awful disaster, but none of us now identify with the culture of pagan Rome strongly enough to want to do this, and I can’t easily think of an example of a “tragic” intellectual history – where we do write of failure, it is in the context of long term success, not long term failure.

Braudel found a way of writing about continuity, the *longue durée*, about slow change (inflation for example), and about short-term events, and in doing so he solved a formal problem – how to construct a story which recognized different types of time. The equivalent formal problems in the history of ideas – how to acknowledge that the past is different from the present while at the same time explaining why we are interested in it; how to show continuity, resistance, and imaginary progress, while at the same time acknowledging that change does occur, and sometimes for the better – these represent, in part, a set of formal problems that we have not yet solved.

Let me end with a practical example of progress to show what I am getting at. In this case, I want to suggest, what is really interesting is not the progress that took place, but the extent to which progress was delayed, and the interesting thing then is working out what caused this delay.

Whenever our bodies are involved our feelings and emotions, our hopes and fears, our delights and disgusts are engaged. Medicine has always involved doing things to other people that you normally should not do – touching them, hurting them, cutting them open. Think for a moment
what surgery was like before the invention of anaesthesia in 1842. Imagine amputating the limb of a patient who is screaming and struggling. Imagine training yourself to be indifferent to the patient’s suffering, to be deaf to their screams. Imagine developing the strength to pin down the patient’s thrashing body. Imagine learning how to be, as Ambrose Paré, the great sixteenth-century surgeon who pioneered the tying off of blood vessels when performing amputations, put it, “resolute and merciless.” Imagine taking pride, above all, in the speed with which you wield the knife, in never having to pause for thought or breath.

Now think about this: in 1795 a doctor discovered that inhaling nitrous oxide killed pain, and the fact was published and discussed. Nitrous oxide was used as a fairground amusement; there was no mystery about its properties. Yet no surgeon experimented with this, the first anesthetic, nor with carbon dioxide, which Henry Hickman was using as a general anesthetic on animals from 1824. The use of anesthetics was pioneered not by surgeons but by humble dentists, not in London, or Paris, or Berlin, the centers of medical research, but first in Rochester, NY and then in Boston. One of the first practitioners of painless dentistry, Horace Wells, was driven to suicide by the hostility of the medical profession. When anesthesia was first employed in Europe, in London in 1846, it was called a “Yankee dodge.” In other words, practicing anesthesia felt like cheating. Most of the characteristics the surgeon had developed – the indifference, the strength, the pride, the sheer speed – were suddenly irrelevant. Why did it take fifty years to invent anesthesia? Any answer has to recognize the emotional investment surgeons had made in becoming a certain sort of person with a certain set of skills and the difficulty of abandoning that self-image. Interestingly, the first European to adopt the Yankee dodge was the surgeon who had least to fear from the accusation of cheating: Robert Liston, the man who best embodied the traditional skills of the surgeon, the man who worked faster than anyone else.

The history of medicine has to be something more than just a history of knowledge; it also has to be a history of emotion. And this is difficult because our own emotions are involved. The truth is that historians do not like thinking about what surgery was like before anesthesia. They too deafen themselves to the patients’ cries. The result is that we never actually hear what we need to hear: because we have not listened out for the screams,
we never hear the eerie silence that fell over operating tables in the 1850s. When something really important happens we can’t fully recognize its significance. Because conventional histories of medicine are full of lots of little discoveries they underestimate the importance of the really big discoveries.

And yet, if they were to focus in on those discoveries, they would find that they all have the puzzling feature we have just seen in the case of anesthesia. They all seem to be unnecessarily delayed. So when we do start looking at progress we find we actually need to tell a story of delay as well as a story of discovery, and in order to make sense of these delays we need to turn away from the inflexible logic of discovery and look at other factors: the role of the emotions, the limits of imagination, the conservatism of institutions, to name just three. If you want to think about what progress really means, then you need to imagine what it was like to have become so accustomed to the screams of patients that they seemed perfectly natural and normal, so accustomed to them that you could read with interest about nitrous oxide, could go to a fair ground and try it out, and never even imagine that it might have a practical application. To think about progress, you must first understand what stands in the way of progress – in this case, the surgeon’s pride in his work, his professional training, his expertise, his sense of who he is.

Anaesthetics made the work of surgery easier. They were no threat to surgeons’ incomes. At first sight surgeons had everything to gain and nothing to lose from the discovery of pain relief. And indeed, from 1846, anaesthesia established itself with great speed. Yet it is clear from the inexplicable delay in discovery, from the extraordinary hostility expressed towards its inventers, from the use of the phrase “Yankee dodge,” that there was something at stake, some obstacle to be overcome. That obstacle was the surgeons’ own image of themselves.
Prospero’s “magic garment”: The Place of Science and Magic in *The Tempest*

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The image of Prospero as a magician and a conjurer was studied in at least two texts in the 60’s and the 70’s: in C. J. Sisson’s “The Magic of Prospero”, included in the volume *Shakespeare Survey*, edited by Allardyce Nicoll and published in 1969; and in Frances Yates’ influential book *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, published in 1979. Perhaps because both studies provide a good deal of information on the place of magic and of occult philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the views of Sisson and Yates have to my knowledge remained unchallenged until today. In this paper, I want to suggest that the frontier between what Sisson calls “white magic,” what Yates calls “occult philosophy” and what other authors call “New Science,” is not as definite as has been suggested. I will thus examine the hypothesis that in *The Tempest* we can find evidence of the early seventeenth-century discussion about the role of the scientist, the political implications of scientific discoveries and the connexion between the idea of “New Science” and “New World.” In order to do so, I will begin by presenting Sisson’s and Yates’s readings of *The Tempest*, particularly with regard to Prospero’s magic. I will then compare Prospero’s magic to the scientific discoveries of the priests of Salomon’s House, in *New Atlantis*, in order to introduce a brief analysis of Bacon’s definition of science and magic. I will then enlarge on the themes of “natural magic” and “natural philosophy”, reporting the information I gathered while doing research for this paper, and giving support to the idea that “occult philosophy” is at the very basis of the so-called “New Science.”
1. Sisson’s and Yates’s readings of *The Tempest*

In his essay on “The Magic of Prospero,” Sisson begins by reminding us that witchcraft and the conjuration of evil spirits were forbidden in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, a statute “against witchcraft and the conjuration of evil spirits” had been passed by parliament under Elizabeth in 1563 and confirmed in 1604 under James I (Sisson 71). Still, as Sisson states, Prospero, the main character in Shakespeare’s last play, is a magician; and it is Prospero himself who describes the nature and origin of his power:

He neglected his duties as Duke, his study being all in the liberal arts, “transported and rapt in secret studies.” (…) His studies included astrology, and he recognizes the auspicious star guiding him to the restoration of his dukedom. He controls the elements, he can raise storms at sea, and aerial spirits come at his call. His powers are superior to those of Sycorax (…). The distinction is sharply made between the powers of Sycorax derived from evil communion with the devil, the father of her son Caliban, and the powers of Prospero, derived from deep study of the secrets of nature. This is made plainly evident in the instruments of his power, his mantle, his staff, and his book, in which alone his magic resides. (…) Prospero is “a magician most profound in his art and yet not damnable.” He has no dealing whatever with the powers of evil. His spirits are of the air or of the upper world of the elements, no infernal spirits of the underworld of hell. His magic, in fact is philosophy in its higher reaches. It is White Magic both in origin and in purpose and effect. (75)

As Sisson explains, because Prospero’s magic was white magic, it was not affected by the statute “against witchcraft and the conjuration of evil spirits,” and was thus acceptable. He is of the opinion, however, that there are some “disconcerting phrases” in *The Tempest*, such as Prospero’s claim “to have opened graves and to have resurrected the dead.” But even then Sisson insists on not speaking of black magic but of the influence of Ovid in the play (76).

Frances Yates’s study of the magic of Prospero is very different from Sisson’s and is based on a thorough examination of the role of occult
philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\(^1\) Yates’s main concern is to explain that *The Tempest* was written during the “Elizabethan revival within the Jacobean age” (Yates 160). According to Yates, Shakespeare’s last play was first performed in 1611 (an again in 1612), a moment when the failures of the reign of James I were becoming more and more evident and when the image of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, was becoming stronger and stronger. In Yates’s view, by presenting Prospero, “magus and conjuror,” Shakespeare was stating his “last word on the occult philosophy” (60). Yates suggests that in order to understand the play one has to think of its context, particularly of the audience that Shakespeare was trying to reach:

Surely contemporary audiences must have picked up the underlying trend of his play as a return to the magical world of the late Virgin Queen, her chastity and pure religion, now continuing and revived by the younger generation. Her philosopher, the white magician Doctor Dee, is defended in Prospero, the good and learned conjuror, who had managed to transport his valuable library to the island. The presence of the Dee-like magus in the play falls naturally into place as part of the Elizabethan revival. That was the world to which Shakespeare had belonged, the world of the Spenserian fairyland, the world of John Dee. He gladly falls in with the revival of the thought and imagery of that world and writes under its influence his most magical play. (60)

In the last few pages devoted to the analysis of Prospero’s magic, Yates reminds her readers that we can find in other contemporary plays references to the occult sciences, which, in her opinion, confirms her theory of the Elizabethan revival within the Jacobean age. (161). Yates ends up by stressing the importance of the occult philosophy in the Renaissance:

The occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age was no minor concern of a few adepts. It was the main philosophy of the age, stemming from John Dee and his movement. (…) The philosophy of the Elizabethan age was the occult

\(^1\) In spite of their differences, Yates agrees with Sisson in that Prospero’s magic is white magic: “That the magic of Prospero is a white magic is underlined on the emphasis on the chastity in Prospero’s advice to his daughter’s lover, and elsewhere in the play. The white and pure magic of Prospero is contrasted with the black magic of the evil witch, Sycorax, and her son. Prospero is using the *De occulta philosophia* to call on good spirits (…) and he overcomes and controls the bad magic of the witch.” (Yates 160)
philosophy of the Renaissance which received a new and powerful formulation in that age. (...) Shakespeare’s great creations – Hamlet, Lear, Prospero – are seen as belonging to the late stages of Renaissance occult philosophy, struggling in the throes of the reaction. (...) Prospero is a late formulation in creative art of the occult philosophy of the Renaissance. (163)

Yates’s book leaves the reader with the idea that *The Tempest* is a play that echoes the past, giving special emphasis to a world that is already dead. This reading of *The Tempest* is no doubt consistent with the commonly-held view of the play as the place where Shakespeare himself thinks back on his own literary career. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest a different reading of *The Tempest*, in particular of Prospero’s magic. I agree with Yates when she claims that the play has to be read within its historical context; but when I think back on the English society of the seventeenth century, I see that along with the revival movement for Doctor’s Dee magic, another movement was happening, a movement that was pointing forward and not backwards, a movement to which Francis Bacon, better than anyone else, was representing. In fact, it is my belief that our reading of *The Tempest* can benefit from a comparison with Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, as there are many similarities between the two texts, particularly the effects of magic, as it is called in Shakespeare’s play, and science, in the words of Bacon. I would also like to suggest that *The Tempest* is not a play that merely echoes the past but rather one which critically reviews the past, by confronting the past and its practices with the new challenges of the present, and those of the future that can already be perceived, namely those posited by the discovery of the New World.

2. Prospero’s magic and baconian science

As has been thoroughly demonstrated by baconian criticism, in *New Atlantis* we find a new notion of the role of science, a science that instead of trying to contest and replace religious truths is presented as a reinforcement of those very same truths. This may explain why the idea of novelty, which science should have implied, was not as striking as it might have been. In fact, as Krishan Kumar explains, a religious role was then attributed to science:

[Bacon] put forward the “truly astonishing claim that it was the business of learning to undo the consequences of the fall of man.” As the “proud knowledge of good and evile” had brought about the fall of man, so Bacon argued, “the
pure knowledge of nature and universality” would lead to man’s recovery of his original command over creation. This then is “the true end of knowledge… it is a restitution and reinvesting (in great part) of man to the sovereignty and power… which he had in his first state of creation.” (Kumar 29)

Bacon thus suggested that by investing in scientific studies, man would recover from Original Sin, but also, and more importantly, that he would recover his original control over nature. And in my view this is the first point where Shakespeare’s and Bacon’s texts meet. In fact, there is a striking similarity between the power of Prospero’s art, as it is called in *The Tempest*, and Salomon’s house scientific experiments. It is Miranda who first alludes to this art when she asks her father

“If you by your art, my dearest father, you have
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch
But that the sea, mounting to th’ welkin’s cheek,
Dashes the fire out.” (1.2.1-5 – my emphasis)

To which Prospero replies, confirming that the tempest was caused by his art:

“(…) Wipe thou thine eyes, have comfort;
The direful spectacle of the wreck which touched
The very virtue of compassion in thee
I have with such provision in mine art
So safely ordered, that there is no soul –
No, not so much perdition as an hair,
Betid to any creature in the vessel
Which thou heard’st cry, which thou sawst sink.”
(1.2.25-32 – my emphasis)

And this art certainly has to do with Ariel, the instrument of Prospero’s power, who describes its work:

“I boarded the King’s ship: now on the beak,
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin
I flamed amazement. Sometime I’d divide
And burn in many places – on the topmast,
The yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join. Jove’s lightning, the precursors
O’ the’ dreadful thunderclaps, more momentary
And sight-outrunning were not; the fire and cracks
Of sulphurous roaring, the most mighty Neptune
Seem to besiege and make his bold waves tremble,
Yea, his dread trident shake” (1.2.196-206)

As I see it, the tempest perpetrated by Prospero at the beginning of the play can easily been compared to what the scientists of Salomon’s house do, as the priest himself explains: “We have (...) great and spacious houses, where we imitate and demonstrate meteors – as snow, hail, rain, some artificial rains and bodies and not of water, thunders, lightnings.” (Bacon 211). The idea that one day man would be able to control the weather was in fact within the expectations that scientists had in late Renaissance.

But there are more similarities between the two texts; the most striking certainly is the idea of the “two books” (the Bible and the book of nature) that Bacon was committed to study, and the “books of Prospero” that are perceived by Caliban as Prospero’s source of power. In my view, Prospero, the philosopher king, can easily be compared to King Salomon; and The Tempest should therefore be seen as the play where Shakespeare best examines the power given to men by “natural philosophy” and the dangers of that power. In fact, even in New Atlantis, where the advantages of science are strongly advocated, its misuses are also denounced. We have only to remember the passage in New Atlantis where the author goes into detail about the art of deceiving the senses:

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2 Michael Walton explains the relationship between religion and this spread of new science: “Natural philosophers were fond of pointing out that God had given his children two books: the Bible and the book of nature. As the word of God, Genesis both stimulated thought about the book of nature and measured the adequacy of theories about the functioning of nature. Because chemistry, like Genesis, dealt with the basic components and processes of God’s creation, chemical theory was dependent for its acceptance not only on its conformity with observation, but also on its agreement with God’s written revealed truth. Indeed, natural phenomena were only intelligible because they reflected the pattern of the divine mind that could be glimpsed in Genesis.” (Walton 2)
We also have sound-houses, where we practice and demonstrate all sounds and their generation. We have harmony which you have not, of quarter-sounds and lesser slides of sound. (...) we represent small sounds as great and deep, likewise great sounds extenuate and sharp; we make divers tremblings and warblings of sounds, which in their original are entire. We represent and imitate all articulate sounds and letters, and the voices and notes of beasts and birds. We have also divers strange and artificial echoes, reflecting the voice many times, and, as it wer, tossing it; and some that give back the voice louder than it came, some shriller and some deeper; yea, some rendering the voice, differing in the letters of articulate sound from that they receive. We have all means to convey sounds in trunks and pipes, in strange lines and distances.” (Bacon 213)

This passage certainly reminds us of the strange sounds in the forest that scare both Caliban and the Italian mariners. Caliban describes these sounds in act III:

“Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices, That if I then had waked after long sleep, Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming, The clouds, methought, would open and show riches Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked I cried to dream again” (3.2.135-143)

Here Caliban is no doubt speaking of a kind of supernatural music, like the one that had driven Ferdinand to the place where he found Miranda, in Act 1:

“Where should this music be? I’ th’earth? It sounds no more, and sure it waits upon Some god o’th’ island.” (1.2.388-390)

But there are more parallels that can be drawn between The Tempest and New Atlantis. The episode where, in Bacon’s utopia, we are told that St Bartholomew trusted to the floods of the sea an ark with a book containing all the canonical books of the Old and New Testament (even those which, at the time, had not been written), thus making Christianity enter Bensalem by God’s providence, can easily be put side by side with the boat, containing
books, where Prospero and Miranda travelled unto the island. The ideal of secrecy is also present in the two texts. Indeed, the society depicted in *New Atlantis* is full of secrets. Often the dialogue between the narrator and the Bensalemians is interrupted by something that is not revealed. In the same way, in *The Tempest* there are several references to Prospero’s secrets. A whole system of surveillance has been built upon this idea of secrecy. Similarly, references to eyes watching the mariners and to the King Salomon’s House as “the very eye of this kingdom” are abundant in *New Atlantis*. And in the same way, in *The Tempest*, Prospero sees everything, if not through his eyes, at least through the eyes of Ariel. And as in *New Atlantis* there is a strong control of space (mariners are told that they cannot visit certain parts of the island), so Prospero dominates and controls the space of the island, dividing the characters by different spaces, through the intervention of Ariel.

By looking at these similarities one can conclude that Prospero’s magic and Bacon’s science are not very different, at least in their effects. But in order to understand why we in this context can consider magic and science as words which are almost synonymous and interchangeable, we will have to consider more closely the nature of the secrets referred to in both texts.

3. The professors of secrets


The professors of secrets affirmed the superiority of experience over reason in the search for scientific knowledge. They believed that nature was permeated with “secrets” and occult forces that lay hidden underneath the exterior appearances of things. (Eamon 269)

According to Eamon, “the ‘new’ scientific epistemology advanced by the professor of secrets was (…) that of the hunter. (…) Just as the hunter tracks his hidden prey following its spoor, the hunter of secrets looks for traces, signs, and clues that will lead to the discovery of nature’s hidden causes” (269). Eamon further states that “The Renaissance princes quested passionately after natural ‘secrets’ especially those pertaining to alchemy and magic.” (270). And he gives many examples:
The emperor Rudolf II, Europe’s most famous patron of the occult sciences, was an avid collector of secrets. A Venetian observer at the imperial court reported that Rudolf “delight in hearing secrets about things both natural and artificial, and whoever is able to deal in such matters will always find the ear of the Emperor ready.” The Medici grand dukes were also zealous seekers of alchemical, magical, and technical secrets. Francesco I de Medici became famous for his preoccupation with alchemical and technological experiments, which he carried out in a laboratory at the ducal palace. Arriving at the laboratory early in the morning and staying until late at night, Francesco experimented with porcelain, enamel, and majolica; distilled medicinal waters, raised silkworms, and made incendiaries, counterfeit jewels, and china. Francesco’s son Don Antonio, a devotee of alchemy, personally conducted alchemical experiments in the fonderia he had built at the palace. Don Antonio recorded his experiments in a huge four-volume manuscript containing secrets on everything from the transmutation of metal to chiromancy, and from astrology to ballistics. (270)

Eamon goes on to refer to famous princes who spent their lives secluded in their laboratories. The idea of Prospero, an Italian prince himself, who, as we can read in the play, “grew stranger” to his state, “being transported and rapt in secret studies” (1.2.76-77) can thus be better understood. But Eamon draws our attention to an important effect of that study, the fact that it had a clear political meaning:

(…) the preoccupation with secrets at the courts also had a political purpose, in that it represented the prince as a repository of preternatural, superhuman secrets, and as the heir to a tradition of esoteric wisdom. In this respect the hunt was a particularly suitable metaphor for courtly science. For just as hunting demonstrated in a spectacular fashion that the good of the earth existed first and foremost for the prince, so science carried out as a hunt – that is, as a capturing of rare secrets – demonstrated that nature’s occult forces existed for the use and delight of the prince. (271)

We must not then be surprised to find out that the best gift that could be ever offered to a prince would be a “secret”:

According to the ritual of gift-exchange, natural philosophers who hoped to find a place at a court had to invent or discover things they could present as gifts to their patrons. Such discoveries did not have to have high intrinsic value; more important, they had to be unusual or rare: only something novel, exotic or surprising suited a prince. Rare specimens of plants and animals,
mysteriously behaving objects, alchemical, recipes, *mirabilia*, exotica, and secrets of any kind were all more appropriate gifts to give princes than practical, technological devices. (271)

In fact, the discovery of secrets became such an important activity that in the second half of the sixteenth century numerous “encyclopedias of secrets” were published (Eamon 273): “Compiling ‘secrets’ from printed books and manuscripts became a respectable occupation for minor writers, whose encyclopedias and miscellanies confirmed the fecundity and diversity of nature and proclaimed the wonders of art.” (274).

But what were these secrets about? According to Cardano, the author of *De Secretis*, published in 1562, there are three kinds of secrets: “unknown things that may eventually come to light; things known to but a few and hence dear; and common things whose causes are unknown.” (Eamon 278). In Cardano’s description of the nature of secrets we can find strong support for the working hypothesis I am examining today: “Some secrets are completely illusory, like the tricks of jugglers and ventriloquists.” (Eamon 279).

In my reading of *The Tempest*, we can again find here an explanation for the strange sounds and noises that can be heard on Prospero’s island, but that can also be produced in Salomon’s House. The deceit of the senses – to use Bacon’s words – was one of the most treasured secrets. And secrets were discovered and kept both by magicians and scientists.

As we can see, the frontier between magic and science was not at all clear. Marie Boas Hall explains this phenomenon in her book published in 1994, *The Scientific Renaissance – 1450-1630*. According to Hall, “Scientists were mostly scholars, physicians or magicians” (Hall 19). And she enlarges on this idea:

To the layman, the scientist has always seemed something of a magician, seeing further into the mysteries of nature than other men, and by means to be understood only by initiates. (...) Physician, alchemist, professor all then wore the same long robe, which might mark either the scholar or the magician. (...) scientists themselves were puzzled to know certainly where natural philosophy stopped and mystic science began. (...) The difficulty was not there was no difference between natural philosophy and mystic science; but rather that men saw that each rational science had its magical, occult or supernatural counterpart. (...)

Fátima Vieira
This tendency to keep esoteric knowledge secret, because only the initiated can be trusted with it, is the chief reason why the magical sciences are so obscure. (166-171 [my emphasis])

These observations led Hall to the conclusion that “sixteenth-century natural magic was indistinguishable from true experimental science in its investigation of the effects of mysterious forces by means of observation and experiment.” (185).

But was there really no difference between magic and science? We already know that magician and scientist wore the same “long robe” and that both were devoted to the discovery of secrets. But were their methods and aims exactly the same? We can perhaps find an answer to this question by a close examination of Francis Bacon’s proposal of a “New Science.”

According to William Eamon, “Francis Bacon condemned divination and natural magic, which supposedly conjectured by a kind of intuition of cunning that was beyond ordinary intelligence” (Eamon 290). In fact, Bacon threw the professors of secrets into the same batch of “talkers and dreamers” that included the natural magicians, the alchemist, the astrologers, and the diviners. By devoting themselves exclusively to rarities and conceits, “these who promise to reveal secrets” neglected experiments on common ordinary things. (…) Bacon also took the professors of secrets to task for failing to understand the proper purpose of experimentation which was to lead to the discovery of laws of nature. (289)

The baconian criticism of the professors of secrets can certainly puzzle us when we think of the similarities between Salomon’s House and the Italian academies of secrets. Eamon provides us with a good explanation for this paradox:

Despite the similarities, Salomon’s House represents a fundamental departure from the academies of secrets. Its methods were radically different from those of the earlier academies. Salomon’s House was a fictional model for the implementation of the Baconian program. Its teams of researchers were organized according to a hierarchy reflecting the ascending stages of Baconian induction. (290)

The difference between magicians and scientists lay then not in the object of their study but in the active experimentation and disciplined observation of the latter.
The conclusion that William Eamon puts forward in his book, that the “new philosophy”, the “new science” departed from the old idea of the “secrets of nature” is no doubt relevant to the working hypothesis I am examining today. In fact, as Eamon explains, the “new philosophy” reformulated the frontiers of science by incorporating the idea of the “secrets of nature” and by analysing them from a new perspective, giving special emphasis to the need for experimentation (300).

Although they are not the same thing, by looking at *The Tempest* and *New Atlantis* in this way we can understand why Prospero’s magic and baconian science look so similar. Furthermore, in my opinion, if we can recognize in Prospero’s long robe, the robe of the magician, we can also undoubtedly foresee the long robe of the scientist, as the differences between the two practices were blurred at the time.

In my view, what needs to be taken into consideration when discussing this idea of Prospero as a magician or as a scientist is the fact that Prospero’s magic is really effective on the island where he rules. And here another factor needs to be taken into account: the fact that the “New Science” asserted itself along with the idea of the discovery of a “New World.”

### 4. New Science, New World

In his essay “Historiography and the Scientific Revolution”, Roy Porter explains that the theme of novelty always went together with the idea of science:

(…) many of the protagonists clearly cast themselves as crusaders for a radically New Science, engaged in life-and-death struggles against the hide bound dogma of the schools: the very titles of Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, Kepler’s *New Astronomy* and Galileo two *New Sciences* catch this tone of embattled innovation. (Porter 285)

As Eamons puts it, “[o]ne of the most important events contributing to Europe’s heightened consciousness of novelty was the discovery of the New World. (…) News of discoveries, which revealed regions completely unknown to the ancients, raised Europe’s awareness of the sheer immense-ness of the world.” (Eamon 274)

This discovery of new lands had an important effect on the perception of the ancient world. Paolo Rossi explains the nature of this effect:
The discovery of new lands also challenged the superiority of antiquity. Simple mariners – declared many – were able to see the opposite of what Greek philosophers and Church Fathers had declared with regard to the inhabitability of tropical areas, the existence of the Antipodes, the navigation of the Oceans, and the impassability of the Pillars of Hercules. (53)

In fact, “new” and “un-heard of”, recurred in the title of hundreds of scientific books of the seventeenth century.” (Eamon 272).

One of the widely accepted beliefs of the time, for instance, was that the new continent was “inhabited by unicorns, dog-headed beings, and men with eyes, noses, and mouths on their chests.” (Rossi 53). But now, by visiting the new continent, mariners could actually see that such beasts didn’t exist. It is true that some mariners met what they would call “monsters”, but superstition no longer prevailed: “Whereas in the early part of the [sixteenth] century monsters were generally seen as portents or signs of God’s wrath, later sixteenth-century natural philosophers tended to view monsters as purely natural wonders.” (Eamon 275). As to the “savages” that inhabited those newfound lands, their nature was widely discussed. While some men, like Paracelsus, refused to recognize to the New World populations human characteristics, other, like Montaigne, stood for the idea that “[h]umanity expresses itself in an infinite variety of forms and ‘each claims the other uncivilized’” (Rossi 55). This clash between the ancient and the new world vision can clearly be found in The Tempest. Sebastian refers to the ancient belief in the existence of mythological animals:

(…) Now I believe
That there are unicorns; that in Arabia
There is one tree, the phoenix’s throne, one phoenix
At this hour reigning there. (3.3.21-24)

And Gonzalo refers to the existence of deformed men:

(…) When we were boys,
Who would believe that there were mountaineers
Dewlapped like bulls, whose throats had hanging at ‘em
Wallets of flesh? Or that there were such men
Whose heads stood in their breasts, which now we find
Each putter-out of five for one will bring us
Good warrant of? (3.3.43-49)
The idea that monsters lived in newfound lands is also conveyed by Stephano, when he first meets Caliban. For him, it is no wonder that a monster would be on such a remote island. It is important to note that when speaking to Caliban, both Stephano and Trinculo insist on calling him “monster”. And there are many instances of this, as we can see if we look at scene 2, act 2:

This is some monster of the isle… (2.2.64)
Four legs and two voices – a most delicate monster! (2.2.88)
A very weak monster. (2.2.142)
A most poor credulous monster! Well drawn, monster, in good sooth. (2.2.143-144)
…a most perfidious and drunken monster (2.2.147)
… this puppy-headed monster. A most scurvy monster. (2.2.151-152)
poor monster (2.2.155)
An abominable monster (2.2.156)
“A most ridiculous monster” (2.2.162)
A howling monster, a drunken monster! (2.2.175)
brave monster (2.2.183)

But as the reader or the viewer of the play will easily conclude, Caliban is by no means a monster, but a man – a deformed man, it is true, but still a man. Montaigne’s vision that humanity expresses itself in an infinite variety of forms thus prevails.

We can then see that a modern perception of newfound lands threw into discredit the ancient idea of the existence of real monsters. What we find in The Tempest is a world in transition, a world where the ancient ideas can still be found, but where modern ideas and perceptions slowly impose themselves. And it is my belief that it is in the scope of this clash between the ancient and the modern world that an explanation for Prospero’s ambiguous art (magic or science) can be found.

A refreshing reading of The Tempest, in this light, can be found in Denise Albanese’s book, New Science, New World, published in 1996. In the chapter devoted to New Atlantis, Albanese relates the issues I have been dealing with to colonial practices:

(…) colonialism is more than a thematized element within the New Atlantis: it is a defining move in the emergence of modern scientific practice from within late Renaissance culture. The process of resorption and transformation
performed by the text with regard to its humanist authority becomes a *discursive reproduction of European practice in the New World*. The connection between the so-called New Science and the New World is repeatedly urged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not only with the Baconian program, but within Continental natural philosophy. (97 [my emphasis])

Albanese’s reference to a “discursive reproduction of European practice in the New World” is crucial to the point I want to make. When Albanese applies this idea to *The Tempest*, things become clearer. In the chapter “Admiring Miranda and Enslaving Nature”, devoted to the analysis of Shakespeare’s last work, Albanese draws our attention to the fact that Prospero’s books had different effects depending on where he is using them.

Albanese begins by reminding us that Prospero’s books are the *locus* of his power (67). In fact, one has but to remember Caliban’s recommendation to Trinculo and Stephano:

First to possess his books, for without them
He’s but a sot. (3.2.92-93)

(…) Burn but his books (3.2.95)

To Albanese, the books are to be seen as an instrument of colonial subjugation:

Appropriately enough for a colonialist allegory, the power of the word in this instance cannot be entirely extricated from its status as an instrument of subjugation, as a form of control almost magical in itself. (67)

What is important to note, Albanese explains, is that when Prospero was in Milan the books weren’t of any use to him – in fact it was because of them that Prospero lost his dukedom. When he gets to the island, along with Miranda, he doesn’t seem to recognize the power of the books – at first he depends on Caliban who shows him the natural fountains and the good fruit trees for survival. But suddenly something happens: Prospero discovers that what seemed to be useless in the Old World is quite effective as an instrument of subjugation both of the nature and of the inhabitants of the New World. As Albanese puts it, “the conjunction of his dominion over the forces of nature and his political domination of a colonial setting underscores the isomorphism of the ‘New World’ and the ‘New Science’”
Albanese explains this phenomenon:

The utopian island precipitates a fantasy, not of the library, but of the laboratory. In the case of Prospero, however, it is as though the colonialist aspects of location itself enable book-bound magic to be turned into a species of science.

Conclusion

With this idea put forward by Albanese that “book-bound magic is turned into a species of science” I reach the concluding part of my paper. In my opinion, in this assertion lies the clue for the understanding of magic and science in *The Tempest*. There is no doubt that Prospero is presented in the play as a sort of magician. References to his “magic garment”, his art or his power abound in the play. But *The Tempest* is a play about a world in transition, a world where the clashes between the ancient and the modern visions are evident, a world where science gains ground over magic. If we understand the nature of this process of transition, in other words if we understand that science does not merely replace magic but actually emerges from old magic practices, we can then understand the hypothesis I set out to examine today – that Prospero’s garment is the garment of a magician, but that in it we can already foresee the garment of a scientist – a man whose old practices become effective when applied to the conquest of the New World.

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Both Conservative and Labour Election Manifestos 2005 agree on the benefits of immigration, focusing on the advantages that it conveys: social diversity, cultural richness and significant contributions for the economy’s overall growth. Nonetheless, both parties intend to bring immigration under control. Whilst Tony Blair defends an investment in the latest technology to keep borders strong and secure and thus reduce threats from overseas, Michael Howard insists on the idea of “bringing immigration back under control” and he seems to be more inflexible concerning this specific issue and dedicates more discussion to it than Blair.

“It’s time for action” is the conservative leader’s leitmotif in the process of attaining the British dream. According to Howard “Everyone should have the opportunity to live the British dream.” And he goes on to focus on the core values that stand for the hallmark of Britain, establishing a comparison between the American and British nations:

One of the reasons why America may seem more successful at integration is that minority communities buy into the American dream. The notion that the boy from the log cabin can make it to the White House is more myth than reality, but it is a myth with a powerful hold. In reality ordinary people in Britain are more likely to make it to Downing Street and to the top of other walks of life. But no one here talks about the British dream. We should. (…) We need to inculcate a sense of allegiance to the values that are the hallmark of Britain – decency, tolerance and a sense of fair play.¹

¹ Taken from an article written by Michael Howard, “Integration is about the values we share, not traditions that divide us” in http://www.conservative.com/title-do?def=news.show.article.page &Object_id=124407.
But this state of perfection will only be acquired if, first of all, some problems are solved in the interest of British society and its values. Immigration is one of them.

Michael Howard’s electoral promise is then to set an overall annual limit on immigration by establishing a fixed quota for the number of asylum seekers, representing a national control of asylum policies. This, indeed, seems to be a measure to be taken into account if we think about the latest terrorist attacks in London. However, it will have to be cautiously planned as it might lead some division over the issues of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity.

Great Britain is, in fact, a nation of immigrants. It has always been invigorated by foreign people, either immigrants or refugees. It has always been cross-bred. Over the centuries, Britain has been invaded by Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, French, Dutch, just to name a few, who settled in a green, arable land, bringing in their traditions, their language and their cultures.

The formation of the British (English) nation was thus the result of a mixture of distinct peoples. In addition, (and if we think about Miroslav Hroch’s theory on the process of nation formation) cultural and linguistic bonds were necessarily shared between these people who lived in the same territory, sharing thus a common past (Hroch 79). These characteristics represent some of the main conditions for becoming a member of a nation. Therefore, national identity means inclusiveness and identifying oneself with a collective whole, entailing mutual obligations between defined people and a state (Verdery 229).

According to Charles Tilly, citizenship is the ultimate representation of that tie: “(...) the identity ‘citizen’ describes the experience and public representation of that tie. Such an identity does not spring whole from a deliberate invention or a general’s ineluctable implications but from the historical accumulation of continual negotiation” (Tilly 227).

The process of nation-building has always been, and continues to be, a permanent struggle between invisible practices of power. Groups within a society can be rendered visible or invisible; they can be assimilated or eliminated (Verdery 230). Immigrants undergo this process of either integration or exclusion, having to deal with questions of place, set of manners and
codes, or of birth and blood which have been included in the project of nation-making. But are they really fundamental?

Our main concern is not to present exhaustive definitions of nation, or of national identity, but to look for ways to celebrate the part immigrants have played in British history, struggling for citizenship and therefore inclusiveness. We will also give special attention to the Pakistanis who, for the last four decades, have been facing racial discrimination from their fellow Englishmen.

However, British people don’t like to think that their history is mainly based on immigration and they prefer to select the most noble and stable events of their history. “They construct mythologies around the national character as still and virtuous” (Winder 1). Immigration is, most of the times, seen as a burden, and immigrants are seen as needy beggars, according to Robert Winder:

> It (immigration) is one of those grim, unsettling words that clangs on our consciences as a duty, an issue – a burden. Britain’s surliness towards foreigners is legendary and well-documented. Yet immigration – more grandly defined or imagined – is not only one of the biggest stories of British life; it is one of the most resonant, and one of the oldest. Ever since the first Jute, the first Saxon, the first Roman and the first Dane leaped off their boats and planted their feet on British mud, we have been a mongrel nation. Our roots are neither clean not straight; they are impossibly tangled. (Winder 2)

In fact, this tangled web of identities, of multicultural and multi-ethnic communities has been reshaping British culture for the last decades.

Britain has always had a position of economic and political supremacy in the world. In the 19th century the Empire gave Britain its power and made the British feel God’s chosen. However, the end of the Empire and the two World Wars in the 20th century distorted this image of a supreme nation. By mid-century Britain was struggling for survival and wanted to recover from the destruction of the Second World War.

As a consequence of the end of the Empire and of the creation of the Commonwealth, many people from the ex-colonies immigrated to Britain. In the 40s and in the 50s of the 20th century, workers from the West Indies were invited in to reconstruct Britain after the 2nd World War. Immigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh arrived in the 50s and in the 60s, in an attempt to escape poverty and political instability.
The search for work and for better living conditions seems to be one of the main reasons why people immigrated to Britain. Nonetheless, after the breakdown of the Iron Curtain, Britain hosted a new type of immigrants, the refugees from the Eastern countries. Among these there were victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia. This fact changed British political strategies a great deal and it caused an onset of protests based on nationalist assumptions. The Conservative Party created the Law of Asylum and Refugees in 1996, which intended to reduce the number of people asking for political asylum and to control illegal immigration. Workers were punished with a £ 5,000 fine if they employed illegal immigrants.

Edward Said, a remarkable intellectual of our times, traced the map of the contemporary world as follows:

For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power (…).

And in so far as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism. (Said 402-403)

The immigrants and the refugees searching for political asylum consequently became the scapegoat for racist people (these are the ones who are often unemployed or belong to extremist groups, such as the skinheads). They are easily identified first of all by the colour of their skin, by the language they speak or by the clothes they wear. They are the others, an epithet used by Eric Hobsbawm:

What exactly is being defended against the “other,” identified with the immigrant strangers? Who constitutes “us” poses less of a problem, for the definition is usually in terms of existing states. “We” are French, or Swedes, or Germans or even members of politically defined sub-units like Lombards, but distinguished from the invading “them” by being the “real” Frenchmen or Germans or Brits, as defined (usually) by putative descent or long residence. Who “they” are is also not difficult. “They” are recognizable as “not
we,” most usually by colour or other physical stigmata, or by language. (Hobsbawm 262)

However, the debate does not arise from the number of immigrants (Britain doesn’t have a high percentage of immigration when compared to France, for example), but on the problems that the ethnic minorities face every day. These people were born and brought up in Britain, a fact that points to the problem of national identity. They are given citizenship, but they still feel like foreigners in their own country.

The census of 2001 indicates that there are over three million non-white immigrants. They represent 9% of the total British population. Over a million are Asian. The Indians, the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis are the biggest ethnic minorities. These ethnic groups established themselves in the Southeast of England and in the Midlands. In Spitalfiels, East of London, 60% of the population comes from Bangladesh. The Pakistanis settled mainly in Bradford represent 20% of the population, and in Birmingham they are 22% of the population. The Pakistanis have reached a total of 476,000 according to the latest census. London has the highest proportion of minority ethnic communities. Nearly 50% of the London population is non-white.²

In these places, multiculturalism performs a major role. The Church of England has been replaced by mosques or temples and the old shops have given place to sari shops and halal butchers (Paxman 73).

Nowadays, as a consequence of the recent terrorist attacks in London and of the war against Iraq, racial discrimination is even more arising from the colour of the skin and religion. Islam represents an evil force for those who are not in favour of the immigrants’ integration in their country. But even within the Muslim culture there is a hierarchy of prejudice concerning the different Muslim peoples. The Pakistanis are the ones who have been suffering the most. According to Tariq Modood, the Pakistanis are a racial underclass in Britain. In fact, quoting Modood, “they have had the most adverse impact from immigration laws and rules, they have the worst housing

² In http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uc/03/census_2001/html/ethnicity-stm
and suffer from the highest levels of attacks on persons and property” (Modood 261). The Police also agree with this racist behaviour, frequently stating racist remarks about the Pakis:

- To be honest, I don’t mind blacks, proper blacks. It’s just Pakis, they claim everything.
- I class them as one thing and that’s it, Pakis.
- I’ll admit it, I’m a racist bastard. I don’t mind blacks. I don’t mind black people. Asians? No.
- A dog born in a barn is still a dog; a Paki born in Britain is still a fucking Paki.
- They actually think they’re English because they’re born here. That means if a dog’s born in a stable, it’s a horse. 

The Pakistanis (and the Bangladeshis) are, in fact, the poorest ethnic groups in Britain. They are all Muslims by religion; they come from only a few traditional areas of immigration: West Pakistan, the North-West frontier area, the Mirpur border area with Kashmir and the area bordering on the Punjab. Their society is strictly structured: women are excluded from any kind of work and have to keep to their traditional costumes. Conversely, men can wear western clothes and are the breadwinners of their families. They interact very little with other ethnic groups since assimilation might mean loss of their identity. Because they are less educated they tend to procreate faster than the average population.

The clear absence of a reasonable number of Asian models in sport, in music or in fashion portrays a sad reality of a Britain segregated by fear and ignorance. Such a reality is also a consequence of the linguistic, religious and cultural barriers that make Asian integration in Britain so difficult.

The solution to these problems can and must lie in multicultural education. The media can also perform an important role in this process of integration, as, with the right orientation, they can help to decrease racial

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3 In Nitin Sawhney, “Whose Country is it anyway?”, The Observer, October 2003 in http://observer.guardian.co.uk_news/story/
4 In http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent; http://www.faithfreedom.org/Articles/sina/pakistanis_in_uk.htm; http:/users.aber.ac.uk/mof3/part2/minority_groups.html
and ethnic hatred. Focus should hence be placed in human rights and not in concepts such as nationalism or national territory. While keeping their own culture, the integration of these minorities in an inclusive culture is urgent. The expression “being quintessentially English” turns out to be hard to specify in a particular period of time, as the ones who claim to have the unique and distinctive characteristics of the English, often come from other countries or their families are immigrants. Michael Howard and Michael Portillo are just two examples.5

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 introduced some measures in order to pacify racial tensions. Section 1 of this Act requires people to have sufficient knowledge about life in the UK, relating to language and society. To become a citizen, an individual must make an oath to the Queen and a pledge of loyalty to the UK.6

Nevertheless, *The English Language Tests and Citizenship Ceremonies* will not stop illegal immigrants and refugees from entering the country.7 They don’t need to know the British history and culture to work for only “a few quid” a day.

In conclusion, British culture has become a melting pot of the different cultures of immigrants and ethnic minorities who, more or less peacefully, live in the same territory. In the 21st century, Britain needs to learn how to deal with this social and cultural phenomenon. The question that one should ask nowadays is what social integration model we want for our societies. The answer will definitely lie in the supervision of the migratory influx, honouring the difference and guaranteeing religious freedom. Only then could we begin to believe in the possibility of the idea of the British dream.

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5 Michael Howard, leader of the Conservative Party, was born in Wales. His father, Bernard Hecht, was a Romanian Jewish who had moved to Britain as an economic migrant. Michael Portillo, former conservative MP, was born in London, but his father, Luis Gabriel Portillo, was an exiled Spanish Republican and his mother, Cora Blyth, was of Scottish origin.


7 These tests were applied for the first time in 2004. The British government now requires all new citizens to pass a “Britishness test” demonstrating a minimum standard of English (level 3) and knowledge of the country, its government and its culture.
Both Conservative and Labour Parties strive for that utopian idea of a pluralist and cosmopolitan country. They both make a play for patriotism by frequently praising the country and its best qualities. Moreover, if decency is one of the British major qualities mentioned, then it should not be forgotten when fair-play, justice, tolerance and, above all, inclusiveness are at stake.

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Hydrography and the Anxiety of the Sea. The Nautical Chart as a Cultural Model

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Hydrography and the Anxiety of the Sea.
The Nautical Chart as a Cultural Model

Há mar e mar. Há ir e voltar.
Alexandre O’Neill

Alles ist aus dem Wasser entsprungen,
Alles wird durch das Wasser erhalten,
Ozean gönn’ uns dein ewiges Walten!
J. W. Goethe

I. The Law of the Land vs. the Law of the Sea, or geography is destiny.

Is geography destiny? Carl Schmitt certainly believed this to be the case. In the short study *Land und Meer (Land and Sea)* from 1942, he wrote that the motions of history were grounded on geographical struggle, namely the conflict between the land and the sea, embodied in two different character types: the *Landtreter* (those who walk on the ground) and the *Seeschäumer* (the pirates/the raging men of the sea).

Man is a being of the land, one who treads on the land (*Landtreter*). He gets up, walks and moves over the safely secured soil. That is his standpoint and his moving ground; the location that determines his perspective, his feelings and his way of looking at the world. (Schmitt 7)\(^1\)

Carl Schmitt essentializes space, believing it to determine man’s vision of the world and his culture, as well as social and political actions. The same

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\(^1\) All the translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated. “Der Mensch ist ein Landwesen, ein Landtreter. Er steht und geht und bewegt sich auf der festgegründeten Erde. Das ist sein Standpunkt und sein Boden; dadurch erhält er seinen Blickpunkt; das bestimmt seine Eindrücke und seine Art, die Welt zu sehen.”
belief underpins Fernand Braudel’s appraisal (1949) in the introduction to volume 1 of his magnum opus La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II, where he argues that geography determines history, naturalizing space as seminal in any narrative of origins. This perception, which has been strongly contested by contemporary cultural geography’s discussion of space as a heterogeneous, constructed and relational social practice, was foundational in Carl Schmitt’s thought and can be helpful in allowing cultural critics to rethink the conceptual framework of geographic tools such as mapping in our academic practice. My claim is that despite the overall distancing from such naturalizing concepts, the whole idea of maps and mapping is still very much pervaded by mental constructs based on the imaginary of the land, on the exercise of power, and by certain prescriptions that are still grounded in the old binary opposition between the land and the sea. The nautical chart, however, presents a resistant representation of space, that stems from what one may call a hydrographical imagination. This allows for a constantly updated positioning of the cultural interpreter by endowing her/him with a renewed agency that in my view fittingly addresses the situated, embedded and critical task of literary and cultural critics in our day and age.

Let us return to Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s views are built on his antagonistic legal theory, devising common law as dependent on spatial law, and constructing the latter as a reflection of geographical conflict between land and sea. Perceiving history as a process of continuous conquest and expansion marked by establishing boundaries, he writes in *Land und Meer*:

All law is basically spatial law. When speaking about a country’s constitution, one refers to it as its basic law, its nomos. Now, the true, real basic law rests essentially on setting certain spatial borders and limits, on certain measures and on a particular division of the land. In the beginning of each great age there is a great land conquest. In fact, each significant change and reshuffle in the vision of the world is deeply connected with geopolitical changes, and a new division of the world is linked to a new conquest of space. (Schmitt 71)

2 Contrary to Braudel, Jacques Rancière believes that the subject of history is the “textually pervaded space” (Rancière 124).
The fundamental structure of this *Nomos der Erde* (*nomos* of the land) rests on the tripartite notion of conquest, partition and cultivation (*Nehmen-Teilen-Weiden*), the conquest of space, the division of space and the cultivation of the soil. Reflecting contemporary nationalist conservative views about the interconnection of soil, blood and culture as fundamental units of the nation, Schmitt portrays the legal order as stable, peaceful, earthbound and male. According to him, the *nomos* of the land dominated the western world order for centuries on end and was strengthened through a steady struggle with the emergent, chaotic, disruptive, fluid, *nomos* of the sea (law of the sea).

Contrasting the conquest of space on land with the conquest of the sea, Schmitt posits the change that came about with the English control of the seas as a highly disruptive spatial revolution that transformed world order, suspended state order in the traditional earthbound sense and definitively changed man’s sense of the world around him. “The order of the land is based on the division of space among states; in contrast the high seas are free, i.e. free from the state and its jurisdiction” (Schmitt 86). This notion framed international law up to the 18th century. Forcing man to perceive the world from the deck of a rocking and unsafe ship, the fluidity of the new order, born out of the fierceness and chaos of piracy,\(^3\) becomes, in Carl Schmitt’s view, an argument of contention against the land rights of the British Empire. Rather, he believed that it was other European powers (the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French) that built colonial empires, England only ruled the chaotic seas. The disruptive *nomos* of the sea with its dangers, its bleakness, its contingency, could not, according to Schmitt, lay the grounds for imperial domination.\(^4\) Because the ocean cannot be tamed, national

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\(^3\) Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh are seen here as examples of the legion of privateers engaged by the Crown from 1550 to 1713 and seen by Schmitt and Co. as covert pirates.

\(^4\) To support his views, Carl Schmitt adds that Disraeli considered the British Empire more Asian than European and connected Queen Victoria’s title of Queen of Britain with that of Empress of India. In fact, Disraeli had already proposed in his 1847 novel *Tancred* the change of the crown’s seat from England to India (Schmitt 94-95).
conservative *Landtreters*, such as Carl Schmitt, dispute the whole notion of maritime empire, as built by the British, with the argument that an empire rests on territorial domination, whereas the British controlled points in charts. Denying fluidity as an empire building strategy, the maritime empire is uprooted and displaced from imperialism itself, as a fluid construction bound by the sea, but with no land links (Schmitt 94).

Despite the general anxiety as regards the exercise of power, the *nomos* of the sea thus becomes for this theorist the epitome of a modern world order, centered around the heterotopical domain of a traceless space, that builds on agility, change and speed, on global exchange, surrounding its core symbolical metropolis, the British Isles, and leaving the continental platform as the backward scene of a forlorn order.\(^5\) Carl Schmitt’s appraisal of the uncanny *nomos* of the sea stems from an anti-modern vision of the world that builds on stability, on somewhat mystical assumptions of the landed order as secure and resisting the fleeting change and contingency brought about by the abyssal immensity of the ocean. Then again, Schmitt’s thesis, though recognizing the inevitable motions of change that arose with modernity’s movement out to sea, is in tune with existing conservative views, a remarkable example of the historical structural anxiety as regards the perception, control and domain of the oceans.

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\(^5\) In *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Joseph Conrad presents an image of England as reborn out of the waters, the ship to end all ships, that is famously referred to as “the flagship of the race.” When at the end of the novel, the *Narcissus* finally enters the Channel, the description of England is co-opted by the heterotopical imaginary of the ship: “The dark land lay alone in the midst of waters, like a mighty ship bestarred with vigilant lights – a ship carrying the burden of millions of lives – a ship freighted with dross and with jewels, with gold and with steel. She towered up immense and strong, guarding priceless traditions and untold suffering, sheltering glorious memories and base forgetfulness, ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions. A great ship! For ages had the ocean battered in vain her enduring sides; she was there when the world was vaster and darker, when the sea was great and mysterious, and ready to surrender the prize of fame to audacious men. A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms and anchored in the open sea” (Conrad 120-121).
II. Some notes towards a hydrographical imagination.

Western culture is filled with myths and legends about magical and monstrous creatures that inhabit seas, lakes, rivers and waterways. It also abounds in tales about monsters that lurk beyond the known territory of Europe, within and beyond the sea, ready to lure and destroy the naïve sailor who dares to transgress into the realms of the unknown. An anxiety ridden imagination about the dangers and perils of the sea has in fact marked western consciousness and has led to the perception of those who dare to challenge it as transgressive beings, dangerous outcasts, a third breed of humanity as stated by the Portuguese statesman Marquis de Pombal, in the 18th century, who famously referred to three sorts of men, the living, the dead and those who dwelt on ships. The abstract and uncanny sea bordering safe land was a constant reminder of man’s limits, it was the threshold to the unknown, inhabited by biologically, socially, religiously and gender deviant beings: monsters, outcasts, devils, female entities and other evil spirits such as the notorious mermaids. The sea was a counter-place to the order of the land, the absolute representation of displacement and the sailor its ex-centric subject.

The anxiety felt when facing the daunting unknown was enhanced by the fear of non-return. Stressing the phobia of the wide fluidity, also perceived in Schmitt’s study, the pre-modern thalassic imagination was grounded on two particular movements: the terror of departure and the obsession with homecoming. In fact, the earliest European literary records tell us stories of men on ships and their struggle to return. Homer’s *Odyssey* is an example of the early *nostoi* (return narratives) that retell the hardship endured on sea by the Greek heroes coming home after the Trojan war. The same structural concern foregrounds Aeneas’ shipwreck in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, as well as the actions of Camões’ heroes in the *Lusiads*.

Literature became indeed one of culture’s first forms of coming to terms with this liquid anxiety, not only by reflecting the fundamental instability of the liquid environment, or the threat of self-destruction it presented, but by becoming a place of contestation, mingling the anxiety ridden fear of the Sea as absolutely Other to the general order of the landstructured subject with an aesthetic attempt to dominate through naming, i.e. writing, this contentious Other. The hydrographical imagination is thus clearly inter-
twined with a form of water writing. In fact, the signifier hydrography, stemming from the Greek words *hydro* (water) and *graphein* (writing), means literally writing on water. Under closer scrutiny, the term appears in the Oxford dictionary of English as “Maritime cartography, that which has the task of surveying and charting the coastline; the scientific study of the seas and the lakes; geographic survey of everything pertaining to the liquid area of the globe.” Hydrography, as water writing, thus becomes figurative, if referring to the writing about water, seas and lakes; theoretical, if discussing literary practice as embedded with liquidity; and acquires a geographical or rather oceanographic significance, when addressing the charting of the sea and water areas. The concept, for the purposes of cultural analysis, then works on two levels. On the one hand it assumes a textual turn, because cartography is a practice that inscribes the textualized surface of the sea. On the other, hydrography as a theoretical model proposes a spatial turn in textual and cultural analysis towards the co-opting of a resistant, fluid and performative concept of space.

I believe that so far the geographical imagination that has marked the “spatial turn” in European and American cultural studies falls short for the purposes of engaging in a cultural analysis that is critical, situated, embedded but cosmopolitan and translational as well, particularly because most practices of what Karen Piper has called the “cartographic imagination” are imbued with an abstract and earthbound reasoning that support an overall strategy of domination: “Maps, it seems, have been so organized, to skate around danger and delimit the boundaries of knowledge; dangerous elements, in turn, are forced into the blank spaces, oceans or margins of the maps” (Piper 7). This fact has led to the contention that maps are fictions of power.

My claim is that it is time to draw aesthetic and cultural energies, not from the mapped limits and boundaries of the land, but from those immense blank margins, the oceans. We could thus integrate into the textual fabric of culture a form of cartographic practice that is *de facto* situated, cosmopolitan, relational and non-prescriptive, in fact one that is fluid and floating: hydrography and its ultimate product, the nautical chart.

Bringing together the textualization of the sea in literature as a primordial means of coming to terms with the anxiety of the untamed and uncharted ocean, with the historical and technical changes that have
occurred in hydrographic practices, brought about by the advent of the modern nautical chart, I shall use the hydrographical imagination in the context of our late digital post-modernity, as an alternative to the understanding of cartographic practice, and mapping, in the humanities as “a struggle over narrative” (Piper 179), as an emplacement of power struggles either with the aim of establishing control and order (Donnan 53) or as a necessary simplification and abstraction that portrays reality in a way that best serves our purposes (Huntington 31). Instead it will be used as a non-exclusive manner of placing the subject within a space that is simultaneously a non-place, or rather a heterotopia, according to Michel Foucault’s proposal in “Of Other Spaces:”

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these spaces are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 24)

In the ever changing global seas of our post-modern virtual world, the hydrographical imagination stands on a renewed spatial/temporal axis, one that sees space not as a surface for the motions of time, as most modern thinkers did, or space as a solid territory, but rather one that views it as an emergent possibility, as in Paul Gilroy’s notion of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 15-19). For Gilroy, Black Atlantic refers to a transcultural and international zone among America, Europe, West Africa and the Caribbean. This is a zone of political and cultural contestation that arose in the wake of the slave trade, but which continues to persist and has left an indelible mark in the cultures of modernity. Thus perceived, the hydrographic space becomes a performative contact zone, that supports the surfacing of a heterotopic,6

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6 I use the word in Foucaultian terms as a place where several places can be juxtaposed and heterochronic as a surface that allows for the traversing of several time constants.
heterochronic, heterogeneous and relational area, a space of translation where mapping and erasure are confused and contested. More than a counter-space or an empty location, the hydrographic space presents the exuberance of practice, as it only exists when it is acted upon, traversed, navigated and read by the sailor, the navigator, in fact the implied reader. The key to this heterotopia is not, as Foucault once said, only the ship, but rather the nautical chart.

As a primordial means of positioning the subject within the unreferential, unmarked ocean, the nautical chart suits a purpose, getting-there and getting-back. It also fills out the wideness of the ocean with markers, depths, coastlines and positions, in an effort to tame the \textit{horror vacui} of the bleak, unmarked ocean. As argued by Cmd. Alves Gaspar in his manual \textit{Cartas e Projeções Cartográficas}, a nautical chart is utterly pragmatic, conceived with the sole purpose of aiding navigation, marking its dangers (wrecks, cables, shallows, shoals), its aids (buoys, lighthouses, traffic separation schemes) and every other information that best assists sea travel (Gaspar 7). On a par with geographical information (depth, coastal areas), the chart also carries oceanographic information (tides and currents), and information on the weather, geology (the nature of the bottom of the sea), geophysics (magnetic declination N/S/E/W, latitude and longitude) as well as political information (territorial waters, EEZ). For safety reasons, nautical charts are continuously updated and corrected, more often than territorial maps, either by means of renewed hydrographic surveys, by the periodical publication of corrections in sea pilots (itineraries) such as the British Admiralty’s \textit{Notices to Mariners}, or through radio messages to all ships at sea, the so-called “navigational warnings.”

Contrary to traditional cartography, the nautical chart’s purpose is not to reclaim a territory constructed as passive, empty and unlived, as perceived in colonial mapping, but rather a means of making the transgressive implied reader at sea make sense of the world around her/him. As an abstract representation, the nautical chart blends tradition, with both practice and the scientific developments which have contributed to an increasing accuracy of the orientation markers on the chart. Then again it is a contingent narrative of space, whose meaning is continuously redefined as the implied reader moves about. In fact, considering, as Michel de Certeau in \textit{The Practice of
Everyday Life (L'invention du quotidien, arts de faire) that discourse is always a practice of space renegotiated from the location of the speakers, the nautical chart can be seen as the epitome of a practiced discourse of space, a “getting-there” narrative. Ignored in many studies on the spatial-temporary interconnectedness of mapping and modernity, like in Walter Mignolo’s The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization (1995), the nautical chart is a hybrid, a being in-between that blends the anxiety of the subject’s location in the fluid blankness of the ocean and the obsession with way-finding, with the scientific abstraction of space and attempts to dominate it.

Medieval maps and itineraries were the earliest ancestors of the nautical practice of space. Their role was not to prescribe a path, but to enable the user to make sense of the world. The so-called OT or tripartite maps sought to quell the anxiety of the sea in the form of a biblically legitimated narrative, placing the ocean as the utmost border of the world, where evil lurked. Depicting the division of the world among Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, these maps had two basic graphic components, the O of the ocean and the T of the bodies of water that surrounded the world, although this T may also have been a representation of the cross. Other medieval maps, such as the Ebstorf map (13th century) viewed the world in direct connection with the body of Christ, with Jerusalem at its center and again water surrounding its outer limits. Maps presented a telos, as the unknown cartographer of the Ebstorf map stated:

Mappa means image, therefore one says mappa mundi to refer to the image of the world. The first to create one was Julius Cesar with the help of artists, collected all across the world. Regions, provinces, islands, cities, coasts, swamps, seas, mountains and rivers: he joined everything together in a single page. This is not of much use to the observer, but it allows the traveler to have a visual depiction of the things he will find on his way. (Apud Schneider 25)

Itinerary maps for pilgrims in the middle ages and beyond were also remarkable examples of this pragmatism. They showed a number of routes with depictions of stopping places and landscape markers that allowed the traveler to reach a certain location. As spatial practices, itineraries served the purposes of today’s travel guides. In either form, these pre-modern mappings rationalized space according to the priorities of medieval Christendom, those
that emphasized the theological dimension over the description of physical appearance.

The first modern *mappa mundi*, Abraham Ortelius’ *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), drew on the 15th century rediscovery of Ptolomey’s *Geographia*, blending it with data about the lands and global positionings brought about by the navigational travels of the Portuguese and the Spanish, as well as with the new geometric conceptualization of space, producing the beginnings of a geometric representation of the deformation of the Earth’s sphere, begun with Gerard Mercator’s map from 1595. Despite its groundbreaking modernity, Ortelius’ map, as J. Harley argues, is “a value-laden image” (Harley 53), presenting the world as a stage and the atlas as performance. However, paving the way to modern nautical charts, these threshold atlases functioned as narratives that both legitimated contemporary power discourses but still allowed for a subversive visualization of the dangers of risky and contingent sea practices. It is precisely at this stage that land cartography drifts apart from the nautical chart. Whereas the former fills in space with prescribed paths, roads and tracks, opening the ground for human perennial manipulation of space, the nautical chart cannot claim to co-opt the vastness of the ocean, remaining a discourse that opens possibilities of transgression and translation. Invoking once again Michel de Certeau, like discourse, the chart increasingly unlocks new possibilities for the navigator/reader both as spectator and transgressor: “Il ouvre un theater de légitimitè à des actions effectives. Il crée un champ qui autorise des pratiques sociales risquées et contingentes. (...) Là ou la carte découpe, le récit traverse” (Certeau 183).

The chart presents a condition of possibility where the map prescribes, contingency where the map essentializes, fluidity where the map objectifies. The chart’s nature is indeed hybridity, as an emerging product traversing map and narrative.

Without claim to an absolute representation of reality, the nautical chart is the hybrid product of a transitional historical moment. As Ricardo Padrón has shown, it becomes a tool of resistance to the abstraction that foregrounds the conquest of space in modernity (Padrón 58), and is in fact closer to the medieval tradition of itinerary or way finding maps. In fact, the nautical chart is a floating signifier, grounded on the contingency of the signs that make up the “cartographic literacy:” depth and location markers
(buoys, submarine cables, sunken ships, sunken cargo/containers adrift), geomagnetic symbols, in fact signifiers that are conventionally assigned a signified, but whose meaning is only contextual, without any claim to diachronic or synchronic constancy. In Roman Jakobson’s terms, like linguistic signs, the signs that make up the cartographic literacy, are actually shifters, context-dependent floating signifiers. Charts thus provide a contingent condition of possibility, utterly open to the navigator’s routing choices.

At this stage any sailor would argue that there are indeed certain prescriptions. I would prefer recommendations. True, they occur in heavy traffic areas, such as harbor entrances and canals, with the so-called traffic separation schemes, which may not be compulsory, but simply advisable; again in certain dangerous coastal areas, charts may provide recommended tracks, usually described in the British Admiralty’s *Ocean Passages for the World*, a publication recommended for usage with routeing charts, or provided by the port’s vessel traffic services. If we recall that the nautical chart serves the purpose of enabling safe navigation, these coastal limitations do not at all hinder my claim to representational non-prescriptiveness. With no streets or highways, sea paths are non-prescriptive, and may be continuously erased and redrafted as the ship’s course is repositioned, the bearing updated, without leaving any kind of perennial imprint behind. It is precisely this tracklessness that has made sea travel a symbol of oblivion, as we read in the Wisdom of Solomon: “All those things have vanished/ like a shadow,/ and like a rumor that passes by;/ like a ship that sails through the water,/ and when it has passed no trace can be found,/ nor track of its keel in the waves” (Wisd. of Sol. 5:9-10). Depending on practice to acquire meaning, the nautical chart is relational, and contrary to man’s imprint on the earth landscape, it is only over the hydrographical imagination of the chart that the incision of human practice may be perceived, that the subject’s placement and the displaced heterotopia of the sea create an ever-emerging narrative.

The period of transition we live in our late modernity has been dismally defined by Zygmunt Bauman as that of a liquid modernity, and is thus shortly described:
“Solid” modernity was an era of mutual engagement. “Fluid” modernity is the epoch of disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase. In “liquid” modernity, it is the most elusive, those free to move without notice, who rule. (Bauman 120)

Showing that ends meet as far as the anxiety of the sea is concerned, the Marxist Bauman meets the conservative Schmitt. Though reflecting the despondency of fluidity as a menace to a history-centered vision of modernity, Bauman’s appraisal of fluidity proves to be as anxious as Schmitt’s, quoted at the outset, but presents the victory of the chaotic nomos of the sea in a configuration of modernity that is not only defined through time’s transience and speed, but which has redrafted space from a passive surface for historical motion, into an active platform of ever-changing interconnection and creativity. Within this context, the nautical chart presents a dynamic model of cultural analysis, one that is relational and heterogeneous, situated, translational, self-learning and contingent, blending convention and innovation, in fact addressing the metamorphic identities of the twentieth-first century, their claims and contestations.

Works cited


Landscapes of the Being – Autobiographies and Images of the Self

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Landscapes of the Being – Autobiographies and Images of the Self

The tangled web of critical positions, regarding the study of autobiography has, over decades, led scholars to engage in debates about the autobiographical act of writing, as well as about the range, structure and essential features of the autobiography.

My research in the field of autobiographies of such writers as John Stuart Mill, Margaret Oliphant and Virginia Woolf, among others, has led me to propose a new designation for the process of writing the self, the text of life: autobiography as a landscape of the being.¹

To read autobiographies as landscapes of the being is to understand them as a canvas where the images of the self are represented, in a voyage to the understanding of the self. It is to understand autobiographies as a space of communication, where author and audience articulate meanings – where the audience has to make sense of the identity of the author in a simultaneously produced and productive relationship; a relationship which is, constitutive of communication as a social practice, and in which the audience has to understand to whom the author is creating, why, how and when.

An autobiography becomes a map of possibilities of the self, where the author (subject and object of the autobiography) and the reader move and acknowledge conditions of possibility or plausibility (Sinfield) for an

¹ In 1993, when referring to the autobiographical act of writing, Elspeth Probyn proposed the designation “geography of the possible.” The critic read autobiographies as new forms of existence of the being, new forms that talk about transformation and that, when placed in the social terrain, give us an image of other positions and rearticulate a geography of the possible. My own term “landscape of the being” is based on the same concept.
individual and social existence. As a form which invents, in its fictional representation, an identity which only exists in the common and shared space of the narrative, the autobiographical text is the product of the writer’s consciousness and capacity to invest in affective elements which, in turn, allow the reader to feel that space as a knowable space of relations, drawing maps of meaning. What is knowable, Williams writes (Country), is not only a function of objects – of what is there to be known; it is also a function of subjects, of observers – of what is desired and needs to be known.

In “knowable,” we can find not only the subject – the theme which is yet not known, because the consciousness of the moment never precedes the art of creation – but also the author’s capacity to communicate, to make knowable to the other(s) the experiences of the self, considered a set of techniques and practices based on daily life.

But, it is not only the writers who, in the process of communication, are influenced by the social world, as the readers, by bringing their horizons of expectation to their reading, also construct a narrative. The different horizons of expectations, the different readings and different interpretations of each reader are determined by already constituted social differences, which, in turn, construct the experiential context in which the readers appropriate the text. In this dialogical space, both author and reader build a landscape, in an attempt to unite the subjectivity of the different selves in the process.

These selves acknowledge the otherness of the others and produce plausible interpretative contexts of experience, which contain what is written and read, establishing a dynamic relationship between author, text and reader. This means that the identification of the reader’s text with the writer’s text is the result of their triangulation with ideology; by identifying with an autobiography, the reader constructs an “imaginary relation” to the situation the text depicts (Gilmore).

The author is the first participant in the social practice, in the autobiographical pact (Lejeune), as what he gives to the audience to read is his interpretation, becoming an active agent in the choices of what is fictionally created. But this is an illusory process which, according to Gusdorf, begins in the moment when the narrative gives a meaning to the event, which when it occurred might have had several meanings or even none.
The author chooses and selects the ways how and what should be represented and the reader tries to know and to discover the identity who knows itself and who materializes itself through discourse, he tries to know the identity who chooses strategies to represent itself as a cultural construction, in a network of voices and positions. Leigh Gilmore explains that autobiographies are positioned within discourses that construct identity and power, adding that, inasmuch as the individual is a discursive formation, autobiography is one of the major discourses through which it is produced.

In order to clarify my critical stance, I need to briefly refer to the main critical agendas in autobiographical studies. In the eighties of the twentieth-century a new research interest in autobiography, mainly of the Victorian period, cleared the agendas, and brought a renovated interest in the autobiographical writing – the feminist critique developed side by side with the formal paradigms, traditionally based on unattainable presuppositions that childhood and adolescence were part of a logical sequence of cause and effect which culminated in the adult age.

If, on the one hand, the androcentric paradigm represented autonomous individuals, who constituted themselves as the unifying element of time, space and identity, on the other hand, feminist critics considered that women were reborn in the act of writing, developing a cosmovision characterized by relationships.

James Olney, William Spengemann, Avrom Fleishman, John Eakin and John Sturrock, among others, agree that the masculine autobiography has established the narrative structures, the forms of development and interpretative modes of the classical res gestae, and has created codes of masculinity through which the hero is represented.

The critics refer back to St. Augustine’s Confessions, as the master text, the paradigm of all autobiographical stories – as narratives of individual

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2 Generally speaking, the term “discourse” is used as a linguistic concept, meaning an act of communication, a device in which centre we find the speaker; however, in this context, “discourse” is used based on Foucault’s definition of it (Power), as a form of power and knowledge, as a writing, reading and communication game.
development. But, taking for granted that the self is mediated and it is not a model for its times, women have tried alternative structures, adding a feminine sensibility and sensitivity to autobiographical writing.

The creation of an alternative discourse has opened the path to a feminist critical perspective, one which analyses the feminine autobiography as the creation of a multiple and heterogeneous self in a web of differences, breaking with the monocultural imperatives of the being.

In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image, coloured by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders or other. (Jelinek xiii)

Critics such as Sidonie Smith, Estelle Jelinek, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, Shari Benstock, Valerie Sanders, Regina Gagnier, Leigh Gilmore, Carolyn Steedman and Linda Peterson are aware that feminine writing is a still little researched territory, sometimes unacknowledged, given the traditional approaches and its marginality in a male dominated culture. The patriarchal notions of the inherent nature of women and their social role have made difficult their access to the public space. According to the critics, the repression of the feminine discourse condemned it to silence and contaminated the relationship of the experience of self-representation with writing as an instrument of power (Smith).

Whichever critical position one wishes to adopt and to research on, what I propose is to read autobiographies as texts of life, dense and detailed textures of narratives, of relationships and of experiences, in a double articulation of the knowledge of the self and the care of the self, as Michel Foucault has taught us. Either representing a public realm or a private, more intimate one, autobiography always draws a terrain where both authors and readers move and where they recognize conditions of plausibility for the representation of their experiences.

The autobiographer is an artist who shares with other men and women his creative imagination, his capacity to find and to organize new ways of representing the self. Williams (Long) argued that every human being needs to describe his experience, as in this process he remakes himself; in fact, when the author communicates the experiences, he enlightens his past and understands his structure as a being throughout the times.
Mark Freeman defines autobiography as a story we weave out of those tangled threads we believe to be responsible for the texture of our lives. In the process of rewriting the self we tell a story, by definition not a recounting of experience as it was, but a fiction of the self, a selective and imaginative construction of who we have been and who we are. Between the historical facts the author tells and the autobiographical act of telling them, there is a constitutive hiatus, a hiatus which constructs an identity and an agency, not identical to the identity and to the agency of real life; the former are mere representations of the latter, or, put in other words, they are its construction in a new landscape.

For some critics, the idea of fictionality underlies the definition of autobiography; Northrop Frye, for example, argues that:

Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern. (307)

whereas Philipe Lejeune insists that “autobiography is in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction” and Avrom Fleishman writes that:

The intention to “tell the truth about oneself,” like other imaginative projects, is a fictional premise which may issue in highly rewarding constructions of the self.

The autobiographical act is a drawing of a map of possible or of plausible epistemological and ontological filigrees of identities, where the author – the primary subject and the principal object of the verbal action (Spengeman) – is the most qualified authority to dissect and interpret his own world. By means of concealment, omission, distortion and self-aggrandizement, by means of a process of choice and selection, the author creates the coherent knots of his life and the insertion in the real.

Writing autobiographically is, indeed, an act of interpretation and choice, where the lived experience is shaped, moulded, revised, constrained and transformed by representation thus, determining the type of story one wants to tell and the kind of image one wants to leave on the canvas.

Representing the self implies, as Hall (“Cultural”) explains, the positions from where one writes or speaks – the enunciative positions which constitute the self as a new kind of subject. The position we occupy in a
social space, the practices and the identities are not separated categories in a deterministic or hierarchical relationship; they inform each other mutually, creating narratives of relationships and of experiences.

Although one speaks of itself, in its name and about its experience, who writes or speaks, who determines the identity of the narrator and of the subject about whom it is spoken or written, is not identical and is not in the same place. By defining the self as “a reflexive pronoun with two meanings: ‘the same’ and ‘identity,’” Michel Foucault (“Technologies”) shifts the question from “what is the self?” to “what is the plateau on which I shall find my identity?”

This plateau can be understood as the canvas from where the autobiographer gives a certain order to chaos, imposing a structural coherence to memory and to chronology, giving voice to silence, diluting the frontiers between past and present. The remembered past loses “its flesh and bone” (Gusdorf), but gains a new and more intimate relation with individual life which, after having been dispersed, can be discovered and reorganized in a non temporal way. In this reconstruction of the past, memory is a technology of power (Foucault, “Technologies”), it selects the images which the subject wants to transmit according to the place and the time of the enunciation.

The postulation of a meaning to a past experience, with the aim of making sense of the structure of the past, is but the construction of a fiction, an imaginative, selective and literary construction of who we have been and of who we are (Freeman), leading to the creation of layers of meanings, of multiple enunciative positions and voices in a landscape of the being. This postulation dictates the choice of the facts which we want to retain and the details which we want to preserve or forget. It is in this choice that the faults, the lapses and the deformations of memory take place; these faults are the result of a conscious choice of the author who remembers and who wants to gain recognition of a revised and corrected version of the past.

The obstacles to a full reconstruction of the past turn visible and inevitable that there is the creation of a new past, similar to it but also different from it; in spite of all the efforts of truthfulness, the truth any autobiography produces is always necessarily restructured, corrected and revised in its telling, a mixture of past and present, a process of self-invention.
In tracing maps of identification and belonging (Grossberg), remembering is a political act in the sense that what is recollected and what is obscured is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past and thus to the terms of an individual’s self-knowledge. The several enunciative modalities (Foucault, *Power*) show dispersions, reveal the different states, places and positions which the enunciative subject occupies or is given in the moment of speaking or of writing. This is a process which Foucault (*Power*) calls the “discontinuity of the planes” from which one speaks, in a process of becoming and of being (Hall, “Who”).

The process of self-comprehension is reminiscent, in the sense that it gathers together all the dimensions of the self, the dimensions which had been until the moment of writing, unarticulated, dispersed, scattered or lost. This reminiscence is a critical and active process which combines emotions and moments of self-reflection and which gives access to omitted experiences, allowing memory to see the events of the past in a new way.

The teller benefits from a privileged situation of knowing the end right from the beginning. The act of telling is in itself a trick, as it gives us the idea that it starts at the beginning, when, in fact, it starts in the end of the story; there is a relation between past, present and future, in which the end is implicit in the beginning and the beginning is the product of the present. The time of the autobiography moves in the opposite direction to the real, linear time, as to live and to tell are different phenomena, incorporated in the context of a plausible narrative order. The beginning and the end of an autobiography are united by the process of writing, a poetical act in which what has once been present is represented as a story of the past in a new poetic configuration. By textualizing that reality, by converting the experience of a life into a shared and symbolic order – language – the author verbalizes the reassessment of his experiences of life.

If we accept the idea that autobiographies produce a cultural work while simultaneously try to represent the self, we will also have to bear in mind that we must discuss the ways how the teller, the telling and the told articulate themselves in the construction of a fictional self who has no existence prior to the text and who does not coalesce with its creator.

To read autobiographies as landscapes of the being enables the critic to read texts of life which contain the possibility of ways of living within the
social, the possibility of new ethics, and the possibility of experiencing oneself in relation to his other self and to the others, in the historical present of the self (Probyn). It also enables the critic to understand autobiographies as fictions about which the reader has to make sense, in a process of creation of an interpretative context.

To write an autobiography can be considered both a poetical and a political act where the autobiographer chooses to paint the landscape of his being, chooses to draw a map of meanings of his life and of his self, a self that is multiply coded in a range of discourses and conditions and represented by means of several metaphors and modalities, asserting the right to speak rather than to be spoken for.3

An autobiography is a project of a being in transformation, where agency involves the possibilities of acting, of intervening in the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted in a new landscape. However, an autobiography is never the final and fixed image of a life, as the image of the self is always constructed. To represent a life only reveals an image of that same life, an image which is distant and incomplete, distorted by the fact that the subject who remembers is not the same who as a child, as an adolescent or even as a young adult lived the past.

Memory is constantly changing, reshaping our experience of the past and present to create a sense of the future. Memory gives the possibility, in the present, to the experiences of the past of being reshaped in the future, giving them the possibility of existing in a new and recreated landscape, a landscape that is painted in the ways and in the colours of the author’s choice, in the re-configuration of life. Despite the blockage, ruptures and twists of memory, the autobiographer tells his life and plays a creative role in formulating both the identity and the culture in which he is participant, paving the way for a new landscape of his being.

Let us think further on Foucault’s formulation of the “self as possibility” (“Technologies”), I opening a perspective where the self, in its

3 According to James Olney (Metaphors), these metaphors are all the points of view, models, hypothesis and myths created and chosen by the author. They are the means by which the subjective consciousness gives order to itself and to the objective reality.
autobiographical representation, is a political project and where autobiography regarded as a landscape of the being, articulates a way of life and a set of technologies and trajectories, or techniques.

Writing autobiographically is a project of a being in transformation, it is a project of becoming (Hall, “Who”), where agency comes to be the product of diagrams of mobility and placement (Grossberg); agency involves the possibilities of action as intervention into the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted in a new landscape, in a new image of the self.

References


But... you want me to think?

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But... you want me to think?

Twenty years ago, when I began working as a teacher, mathematics, physics and chemistry were considered the difficult subjects. Today, for the majority of students, all subjects are difficult.

It cannot be assumed that the young are less intelligent, or teachers worse today than they were in the past. So what has changed in twenty years that lead to this situation?

The massification of education is, very often, presented as the main reason for this phenomenon, but can this still be accepted as a reason? The number of students has decreased immensely in the last years and the situation has become worse. It is also commonly thought that what is taught at school has no connection with the real world; school is all about theories without practical application. Another reason could be the incapacity of school to adapt to the new demands of society; I must say I would like to know exactly what these new demands are.

Let us look at the real world where our children and teenagers live. The real world is a marvellous place where success and money are a *sine qua non* condition for happiness. A world where the young choose football players, top models, or music, cinema and TV artists as role models, because they are rich and famous. Every bit of news about these celebrities seems to convey the message that their success was easily achieved without having to go through school.

Can school adapt to the extent of matching the demands of this society? Unfortunately, it has adapted. And the result is a disaster.

The basics of today’s education can be summarized in three main ideas:

– Everybody likes to learn

– Everyone can achieve the same goals

– Practical application of what is learnt is essential
Having assumed the two first ideas as being truthful without experimental proof was a mistake. Insisting in their validity after observing they weren’t contributing to a better school is a bigger mistake. To consider essential a practical immediate application of everything taught at school establishes a hierarchy in which Humanities come last, with the consequences we all can observe. It is a paradox that, although science subjects are still considered as the most difficult, this area is chosen by a larger number of students. The immediate reason would be more work opportunities. But maybe there is a hidden reason: for students who have difficulty in interpreting what they read and establishing a relation between different subjects (Philosophy and Literature or History, for instance), Humanities are certainly much more difficult than sciences which, at secondary school level, have defined subject boundaries.

Nevertheless, these ideas have become a given and ministers, opinion makers and parents consider them as a valuable basis.

“Playful and easy” could be the motto of any school anywhere.

School has adapted in the attempt of keeping pace with the transformations of the outside world. Young people like watching videos or DVDs, therefore these are available to be used in classrooms. Ways of transforming schoolbooks into “fun” objects were found. Classes are now a discovery voyage in which every single student can travel at his/her speed. Teachers are there to teach much more than their subject, they are teaching how “to learn to learn.” This activity can be accompanied by constant noise: even if your students are almost twenty years old, you have to understand that youth is vivacious and needs space to express. Some teachers venture to use computers in their classes to match their students’ preference for the use of machines instead of paper and pens.

The curricula and syllabus are reviewed regularly, in order to be up to date with scientific evolution and the fashion of the moment. School is evolving as fast as real world and yet a large number of young students leave school before ending compulsory education. Those who remain in the educational system find secondary school too difficult and teachers are accused of being too demanding.

Secondary school teachers of all subjects complain that students don’t understand what they read. The problem has reached such an extent that
the exams of Portuguese include a glossary, although students are not allowed to use dictionaries.

It is not surprising that English has become a difficult subject. Every syllabus change introduces more trivialities or the issues of the moment. In the current language teaching approach the stress is put on communication. Both students and teachers are led to believe that the form in which this communication is done is of no importance. Textbooks are composed of magazine and newspaper articles, song lyrics, etc., not only because it is thought that these are of greater interest to the students, but also because they are considered easier. Extensive reading is used to illustrate aspects of society and not to enjoy a work of art. Books have to serve a purpose, and as soon as this purpose is fulfilled, they are forgotten.

The three examples I bring here today are chosen at random and illustrate the incapacity to connect subjects and the lack of cultural references.

The first example is taken from a text book: “In late July, the whales begin their return journey from the Barrier Reef to Antarctica and stop over at Harvey Bay.”

After reading, students had to answer the question: Harvey bay is located in:

a) Antarctica  
b) Australia  
c) Oceania  
d) The North Pole

There was a long silence and a brave student said, “It is not in the text.”

Second example, quoting from the text of a 12th year English exam:

You could see lots of niggers hanging from trees in Sabine bottom right after freedom, because they caught them swimming across Sabine River and shot them. There sure are going to be lots of souls crying against them in judgement.

The question was: Consider text 2 and what the former slave meant by “There sure are going… in judgement.”

One student answered that there was going to be a judgement as in Nuremberg, 25 didn’t answer, only one gave the correct answer.

Third example: After reading a part of the poem “Bomb” by Gregory Corso, one of my students said it was not poetry, it was a mess. When asked
to fundament what he was saying, he said it was his opinion, giving for
granted that I wouldn’t bother him again. But I did. He looked astonished
at me and said “But… You want me to think?”

The issues here:
The first is a case of illiteracy. The second demonstrates that, on top of
illiteracy, our children are losing their cultural heritage and, in a near
future, it will be impossible to study western Literature, Philosophy and
Art. The last example points out, with a poignant crudity, the failure of our
Educational System.

Difficulty in interpreting is, obviously, incapacity of reasoning.
Reasoning is a skill that can be trained only if the individual puts his will
and hard work to it. Claiming that it can be reached by playing games and
repeating what was learnt by heart is a lie.

Education is a serious matter. We should not follow theories that are
contradicted by simple common sense.

If “the medium is the message,” then if school had a pleasant
atmosphere that compelled to hard work instead of chaotic pleasure, society
might also be able to understand that achievement at school can only be the
result of hard work.
America vs anti-America: 
A Short History of an Idea

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America vs anti-America: A Short History of an Idea

What do we think of America when we think of America?
Why do we think of America what we think of America?

Although no specialist in American studies myself, I will try in this essay to highlight two central ideas: first, the historical formation and development on both sides of the Atlantic of an Eden-like image of America, and/or specifically of the United States, from the Renaissance onward – an image strongly anchored in the millenarian stratum underlying the dynamics of American history; second, the historical formation and contemporary developments of its counterpart, the phobic vision of America, that generally amounts to a contempt for open societies in general, whether it is pre-modern, anti-modern or post-modern. In my conclusion, this dystopian vision of America as the root of all evils – in recent years, much more widespread than its rival notion of America as New Promised Land – may eventually uncover an ambivalent way of making politics, as it may prove itself the consequence of the philosophical unawareness to identify the cultural and political implications of what Jean-François Revel recently called L’Obsession Anti-Américaine.¹

“Thus in the beginning all the World was America (...)” (Locke 301): Locke’s well-known simile in his Second Treatise on Government, equating America to the pre-civil, pre-political, Adamic status naturalis may undoubtedly be taken as a milestone in the tradition of thought that gives America a significant role in the expression of the zest of the Renaissance and early modern Europe for the New World.

The name America is said to have been derived from that of the Italian explorer and friend of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, who made several voyages to the Western Hemisphere and described his travels there in several letters to friends in Europe. One of these letters, published in 1504, used the term “Mundus Novus” to designate America. Copies must have circulated from hand to hand, and one of them may have reached the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller, who was apparently unaware of Columbus’ voyage in 1498. Waldseemüller included some of Vespucci’s descriptions in his *Cosmographiae Introductio* (1507) and observed that another fourth part of the inhabited Earth had been discovered by Americus Vespucius. He suggested then that the new land be called America, in recognition of that explorer’s voyages. Waldseemüller’s book was widely read, and the new designation was eventually universally accepted.

In 1578, the term “American” was first used to refer to its dark-skinned inhabitants, but a century later, in 1697, the Puritan minister Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the author of *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), was already referring to the colonists from England as “Americans.” In the context of the culture of the British Isles, though, America began not as geography, but as a fantasy in the minds of Elizabethans and Jacobians such as John Donne:

> O my America! my new-found-land,  
> My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man’d,  
> My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie,  
> How blest I am in this discovering thee! (Donne 89)

This enthusiasm became still more significant in authors much too sceptical about the excellence of European values. European civilization has always had its discontents. And in the 15th and 16th centuries, Portuguese and Spanish overseas exploration began to accumulate evidence of ways of life supposedly close to those of man before the Fall. Naked, untutored, free of social ties, only dependent on Nature, those human beings were often looked on as examples of worthy creatures possessing natural virtues that largely made up for their lack of Christian education. This paradise regained of primitive innocence might in the end reveal itself a pure construct of the imagination, as in More’s *Utopia* (1516), but it presented nevertheless an image of the goodness of a simple life uncorrupted by money, commerce,
and luxury. Just like Hytlodaeus’ Utopians had much to teach to England and to Europe in general – for instance, about the sheer madness of the process of enclosures of communal fields – in a not very dissimilar way, Montaigne’s example of such a repugnant practice as cannibalism, so accurately described in his *Essays* (1580), contained some moral lessons for Europeans, whose mutual barbarities in the context of civil and religious wars seemed (were) much worse.

And in fact, in the seventeenth century, missionaries sent to the New World to evangelize the native peoples of North America believed they really had found the good savage of legend among the Huron populations of North America. Their egalitarian way of life and technical proficiency, compared with those of their neighbours, combined to make them appear a symbol of the morally upright nature of humankind – especially, when nurtured far from the corrupting influence of European civilization. The sway of this vision of America as a land of primitive virtue, blended with the Puritan doctrine of the “Elect,” brought by the some 80 000 dissidents from the Established Church, who fled to the New World during the years 1620-40 from an England they considered as hindering their quest for the purification of religion, grew steadily from the mid-seventeenth century onward.

A number of historians and cultural analysts have clearly drawn our attention to the fact that the idea of the redemptive mission which has motivated so much of the United States history and culture is at least as old as the Republic itself – if not older. Consciously or not, the celebration of American ingenuousness owes much to one of the elements generally identified as essential to the Puritan conception of the plan of God. Puritans did believe that it was necessary to be in a covenant relationship with God in order to redeem one’s sinful condition; that universal submission to God’s rule was imperative; that true Christians should lead a life in accordance with His moral law (expressed in the Ten Commandments); that God had

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chosen to reveal salvation through preaching; and that the Holy Spirit, rather than human reason, was the true instrument of salvation.

This Puritan idea of giving birth to the Holy Commonwealth by the establishment of a covenant-ed community was carried to New England, where efforts to construct a holy “city upon a hill” as an example for the whole world to contemplate notably anticipates the expression, in the future Constitution of the United States, of the right of each free-born and equal Christian to undertake his personal quest for both salvation and spiritual well-being (or the pursuit of happiness, as the drafters and signers of the Constitution put it).3 The famous proclamation made in 1630 by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, entitled *A Modell of Christian Discourse*, gave the distinctive Puritan image of America as “city upon a hill” its most resonant echo:

Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke, and to provide for our posterity, is to followe the counsell of Micah, to doe justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together, in this worke, as one man. Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly affection. Wee must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's necessities. Wee must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekeness, gentlenes, patience and liberality. Wee must delight in eache other; make other's conditions our oune; rejoice together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allways haueing before our eyes our commission and community in the worke, as members of the same body. Soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his oune people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our wayes. Soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdome, power, goodness and truthe, than formerly wee haue been acquainted with. Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when hee shall make us a prayse and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “the Lord make it likely that of New England.” For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely

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with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. Wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of God, and all professors for God’s sake. Wee shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither wee are a going.\(^4\)

The status as chosen people implies a specific covenant with God, which in turn carries with it rewards in the form of political greatness, as well as a moral duty to lead the rest of mankind on the path of redemption. Winthrop’s concept of Providence restores to History a sense of the dynamics of the divine purpose, which in the end fostered the American logic of progress as a perpetual state of social improvement. In much the same vein, Herman Melville later proclaimed the exceptionalism of the American people and the American (manifest) destiny in *White Jacket: Or, the World in a Man-of-War* (1850):

> We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world (…). God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. Long enough have we been sceptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether indeed the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us (…).\(^5\)

Still, at the time of independence, America – as the result of the confluence of a new nation in the process of its own making and of the adamic New World myth as opposed to the decadence of the civilized manners in Europe – was far from being able to show the signs of strength of later eras. It was simply definable as the land south of the great lakes, north of Florida, and westward to the Mississippi. Louisiana was still French and Florida Spanish. The prospects for the new-born country looked bleak,


as it had no gold, no financial resources, few manufactures, no centre of union, no common purpose, and considerable tension stemming from rival state authorities with conflicting interests.

On a symbolic level, however, the definition of the free American, enlightened, self-reliant and capable of shaping his natural and social environment according to the tenets of the primitivistic reverence for the virgin land of the New World, was already being elaborated by authors like James Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) give further evidence of his insight into the distinctive character of the United States and the American people as distinct from inherited Western/European conventions:

An European, when he first arrives, seems limited in his intentions, as well as in his views; but he very suddenly alters his scale; two hundred miles formerly he appeared a very great distance, it is now but a trifle; he no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes, and embarks in designs he never would have thought of in his own country (...).

He begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived, but simply vegetated; he now feels himself a man, because he is treated as such; (...) What a change indeed! It is in consequence of that change that he becomes an American.6

In their writings, the intellectuals of the Revolution themselves expressed the belief that America was not just an extension of Europe, but a new land, a country of nearly unlimited potential and opportunity, that was being abused by the British Empire from which it had outgrown (Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* could be the best example in this context). It is possible that at the time not many Americans would have been willing to agree with this idea, but it seems beyond doubt that it also gave an important contribution to lay the intellectual foundations of the concept of American exceptionalism.

Although the Puritan worldview of the United States’ New England ancestors was later mixed with the religious character of the South colonies

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(markedly influenced by English Anglicans) and that of the Middle Colonies (composed of small congregations of Dutch Mennonites, French Huguenots, German Baptists, and even Portuguese Jews, together with larger communions of Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Quakers, and Anglicans, not to mention African Americans and the indigenous Indians, with religious traditions of their own), adding further variety to the British North America mosaic, the deep moral values of Protestantism remained part of the American national identity for centuries and arguably remain so today. Even if American exceptionalism is now secular in nature, a portion of it undoubtedly stems from America’s Protestant roots.

Ever since then, overtly millenarian vocabulary is often present both in political and in literary discourse – notably, in the speeches of American presidents.7 When Ronald Reagan said in his farewell presidential address that America was “a shining city on a hill,” he credited John Winthrop as the source, but the ultimate reference is, of course, Christ Himself.8 The quotation shows how America and Americans, their domestic self-image, their political discourse, and their collective social views are infused with the belief that their role is not only to establish liberty and peace for themselves, but also to found a novus ordo seclorum, a New World Order, as acknowledged by the motto inscribed on the Great Seal of the United States.

In his essay on The Puritan Origins of the American Self, Sacvan Bercovitch characterized “American selfhood as identity in progress, advancing from prophecies performed towards paradise to be regained” (Bercovitch, Puritan 143). He was referring to that long tradition of American celebrations of America, especially, by New England authors, like Cotton Mather (1663-1728), who envisioned the American way spreading over the face of the earth; like Samuel Baldwin (1731-84), who prophesied the expansion of the United States into a Millennial Republic and its dominion over the whole

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8 Mat. 5:14-15: “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. (...) Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven.”
world; like the Romantic poet James Russell Lowell (1819-91), who glorified “New birth of a new soil, the first American;” or like Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), who conceived of American wilderness as the preservation and the future of the world. These authors, like many others in American literary history, coming from a tradition of radical Protestant feeling, harboured deep within a hope for a Millennium that would be followed by a new, purified world order, in which the true believers would be rewarded.

Moreover, they all pictured the New Jerusalem on the actual soil of New England: “One thing is plain for all men of common sense and common conscience,” Ralph Waldo Emerson declared, “that here, here in America, is the home of man.” What made this self-evident for Emerson was not (only) the observation of the real men and women of America, but America as men and women, in Bercovitch’s words, advancing towards a paradise to be regained.

Puritans envisioned an idealized community in which all citizens would focus their lives on the word of God. And ironically enough, the Puritans’ almost single-minded pursuit of a perfect society based on biblical teachings resulted in impressive success in secular affairs, as we know from Max Weber’s (long disputed) thesis on the connection between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

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9 Samuel Baldwin, A sermon preached at Plymouth, December 22, 1775, Being the anniversary thanksgiving, in commemoration of the first landing of the fathers of New-England, there; anno Domini, 1620, Boston, printed by Powars and Willis, 1776.


sacrifice personal (material) ambitions for larger (spiritual) goals, as their followers also believed that they could be a blessed people chosen by God to set an example for others.

If the key to what Sacvan Bercovitch termed the “American Jeremiad” is the blurring of individual and collective pursuits (Bercovitch, American 16), in Walt Whitman’s poetry we may see the cosmic self identified with the “genius loci” and the very identity of American culture:

ONE’S-SELF I sing, a simple, separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the
Muse,

I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing. (Whitman 31)12

It was Gertrude Stein, though, who finally gave this image of America’s quintessential wilderness its most memorable definition:

In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is. 13

In the wake of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” supporters of the idea of American exceptionalism often claim that the main ingredient of “American identity” was created at and with the Frontier, where the rugged individualism of the settlers and the undomesticated conditions of Nature gave birth to the vitality of the society and the expansion of the

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economy of the United States in the course of the nineteenth century. The incentives of land, wealth, opportunity and freedom offered by the New World seemed unparalleled and gave the pioneers (at least) the hope that they could begin developing new concepts of self and society previously unimagined or inhibited. For much of the nineteenth century, the frontier, as line of civilization, both geographic and symbolic, extended towards what the settlers considered to be “virgin territory” in the West. In 1845, John O’Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, associated the frontier to the “nationalistic theology” (Weinberg 17) of America’s Manifest Destiny:

> It is our manifest destiny to overspread the continent, allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. (Suddath-Levrad 76)

No matter when the “destiny” did in fact become “manifest,” the fact is that the frontier, the decisive element that stimulated individualism and encouraged collective self-assurance, was declared closed in 1893. But according to the above-mentioned thesis of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), it gave a decisive contribution to the shaping and glorification of the American representation of itself:

> That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good or for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (Turner 37)

Only in 1935 were the consequences of the closure of the frontier clearly outlined in a radio address by Franklin Roosevelt, whose distinctively personal view of the common good and the American purpose underpins the whole philosophic dimension of Roosevelt’s statesmanship:

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There was a time when the formula for success was the simple admonition to have a stout heart and willing hands. A great, new country lay open. When life became hard in one place it was necessary only to move on to another. But circumstances have changed all that. Today we can no longer escape into virgin territory: we must master our environment. The youth of this generation finds that the old frontier is occupied, but that science and invention and economic evolution have opened up a new frontier – one not based on geography but on the resourcefulness of men and women applied to the old frontier.\footnote{Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “A Radio Address to the Young Democratic Clubs of America”, August 24, 1935, in \textit{The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume 4: 1935}, New York: Random House, 1938, 336. Also available online at http://newdeal.feri.org/speeches/1935f.htm.}

Notwithstanding, the persistence of the metaphor of the frontier revealed all its strength a quarter of a century later, on occasion of John Kennedy’s Inaugural Address in 1961, known as “New Frontier Speech,” which kindled the historical imagination in large sectors of the American society with the challenge of an extraterritorial frontier:

Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

(...)

Now the trumpet summons us again – not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need – not as a call to battle, though embattled we are – but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation” – a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.\footnote{Inaugural Address of President Kennedy, January 20th, 1961, in \textit{Department of State Bulletin}, February 6, 1961, 175-176, available online at http://www.eff.org/legal/Constitutions/kennedy_inaugural.address.}

In brief, not only “the immense popularity of American movies abroad,” but also the sweeping energy of this constant process of reinvention of itself through the setting of utopian or quasi-utopian goals seems to demonstrate Mary McCarthy’s penetrating dictum “that Europe is the unfinished negative of which America is the proof.”\footnote{Mary McCarthy, \textit{On the Contrary: Articles of Belief, 1946 – 1961}, New York: Noonday, 1962.}
To cut a long story short, then, we might perhaps sum up the constitution, development and apogee of this positive, optimistic, post-Enlightenment image (and self-image) of America as the result of the intertwining of two different layers: the vision of progress as utopia, and the vision of destiny as redemption.

– First and foremost, the vision of continuous progress appears as the essential quality behind the image of the American Dream, and of America as the land of self-realization *par excellence*. It conceives of America as the place where all human beings are free to succeed to the limits of their innate abilities. It corresponds to the dream of building a society unfettered by tradition, a society whose obligation is not to History, not to the conventional wisdom of the past, but to novelty and the possibilities of a boundless future. This idea essentially holds forth the feasibility (and in some cases, the prophetic certainty) that there will eventually arise a civilization on earth characterized by harmony, wholeness, creativity and abundance, a civilization marked by oneness between God (since it is Puritan in origin), humankind and Nature. In its secular form, this idea becomes one of the possible post-Renaissance metamorphoses of utopia.

– But in religious contexts (and this is the second layer just mentioned), the idea of America as utopia became (and possibly still becomes) synonymous with the belief in a Heavenly City for the just in an age to come. To work this suggestion out fully would require a study of its own. In the context of this essay, let it suffice to say that this feature of the Puritan legacy represents its most lasting contribution to the American sense of community and identity. From the Declaration of Independence to John O’Sullivan’s notion of Manifest Destiny, from the notion of the Manifest Destiny to John Kennedy’s concept of the New Frontier, America has always seen its historical purpose as a sort of challenge. America’s representation of itself along Puritan lines inevitably evokes the New Promised Land where God’s Kingdom would finally manifest itself on earth. Such a Kingdom, however, is unlikely to be created only through the efforts of Humanity. Its emergence must be brought about through an act of God at the climax (or at the end) of History. Human beings can prepare for it, but ultimately its manifestation will only be possible through apocalypse (that is, through “revelation,” since the ancient Greek verb *apokalyptein* etymologically means to uncover or to reveal). In a deeper spiritual sense, then, apocalypse stands for an act of birth and redemption, not of death or destruction, an act ultimately rooted in the conflict between light
and darkness, on both a personal and a cosmic scale. This image entails the presence, real or imaginary, of an enemy and the consciousness of a struggle. It divides life into two opposing sides and defines the meaning of existence in terms of battle and conquest, with apocalypse itself being the final moment of victory over the forces of wrongdoing. The apocalyptic vision, so deeply rooted in North American history and culture, seeks the final battle, the resolution of the dialectical tension between diametrically opposed forces. It eventually manifests itself as a sense of mission, as the conscience of belonging to the community of the happy few bearers of divine Justice on earth: a community always facing a complex and hostile environment and always gaining strength from the challenges it has to face, either in the form of another country, a self-imposed frontier, or Nature itself. In this perspective, the predominant European cultural model and the North-American cultural pattern vary considerably, as they may be said to correspond to a distinction first introduced into Anthropology by Ruth Benedict between “shame culture” and “guilt culture,” relying, respectively, on external sanctions for righteous behaviour, in the former case, and on an internalized conviction of sin, in the latter.\textsuperscript{18}

But, then again, what do we think of America when we think of America?

Then again, why do we (Europeans) think of America what we think of America?

As American power grew to overshadow that of European imperial nations in the course of the twentieth century and, most notably, after the Second World War, resentment of America grew with it and provoked widespread feelings of mistrust and hostility. It seemed that American utopia had finally segregated its own dystopia.

But what we generally ignore is the fact that the phobic vision of America, far from being just the \textit{lingua franca} of the intellectual \textit{élites} in post-May 68 Europe, was born long before, certainly before the Vietnam War, probably before the Second World War and most surprisingly even before the birth of the North-American republic itself as a nation. According

to the most insightful analyses of the phenomenon, this symbolic anti-America rests on the singular idea that at the core of American life there is something deeply wrong and threatening to the rest of the world. In its most simple and archaic form, this notion takes for granted the sheer impossibility of civilization in the New World, as in the celebrated aphorism attributed to the French statesman Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929):

America is the only nation in history which miraculously has gone directly from barbarism to degeneration without the usual interval of civilization.

In a way, this absence of “the usual interval of civilization” might be looked on as a witty variation on a distinctively Arnoldian theme:

Our society distributes itself into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace; and America is just ourselves, with the Barbarians quite left out, and the Populace nearly.

In a less humorous note, however, the French novelist Henry de Montherlant (1896-1972), not infrequently attacked for his notorious Fascist leanings, launched only a half-century ago one of the most scathing attacks on America:

One nation that manages to lower intelligence, morality, human quality on nearly all the surface of the earth, such a thing has never been seen before in the existence of the planet. I accuse the United States of being in a permanent state of crime against humankind.

As a rule, political discourse in Europe is rich in a phobia directed against all things American, evenly distributed across the whole of the political spectrum – both to the left and to the right. We might take, for

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instance, De Gaulle’s following statement as just another chapter in the long history of the French “obsession anti-américaine:”

You may be sure that the Americans will commit all the stupidities they can think of, plus some that are beyond imagination.

Or Churchill’s mistrust of his transatlantic allies in the Second World War as a form of cultural disparagement, with a modicum of condescension and humour:

You can always count on Americans to do the right thing (...) after they’ve tried everything else.

It would be tempting to write off this phobic vision of America just as a stereotype. Though it contains some rudiments of prejudice, it has been mostly a creation of “high” thought and speculative philosophy. Some of the most prominent European thinkers of the past two centuries have contributed to its making in such a way as to make it adamantly opposed to refutation by facts, History, or cultural analysis. The focus of these writers, philosophers and intellectuals (and of all the complex intellectual lineage behind anti-Americanism) has not always been with the “real” History of a “real” people, with the “real” Culture of a “real” society, but more often with a general idea of progress and modernity, for which “America” became the spiteful symbol.

The view of America as dystopia was developed over a period of more than two hundred years and involves at least five major themes, which have mutually influenced in the course of History, namely:

– the eighteenth-century thesis of an innate American decadence (Buffon, Cornelius de Pauw);

– the Romantic critique of American soullessness and rootlessness (Nikolaus Lenau, Herder);

– the mid-nineteenth century spectre of racial impurity in the American “melting pot” (Gobineau);

– the modern critique of America as an empire of crude technology predominant in the first half of the twentieth century (Nietzsche, Spengler, Heidegger);

– the contemporary post-modern disavowal of America’s rampant consumerism and “hyperreality” (Baudrillard, Zizek).
The initial layer, found in the scientific thought of the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, has also been called “degeneracy thesis” and refers not just to the United States, but to the New World in general. In fact, during the first phase of anti-Americanism, European philosophers blamed the putative inferiority of America on the natural environment. Drawing probably on Montesquieu’s belief that climate was the most important factor in human development, this thesis held that, due chiefly to atmospheric conditions, in particular, excessive humidity, all living things in America were not only inferior to those found in Europe, but also in a condition of decline *avant la lettre*.

The greatest biologist and naturalist of his time, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-81) was in fact convinced that life degenerated in the American continent because of the hard climate conditions of the New World. Without any empirical evidence, he contended that animals in America were smaller and feeble than their European counterparts; and if this were true of animals, it should also be true of humans. In a way that may shock the canons of today’s political correctness, Buffon wrote accordingly that the American Indian “is feeble in his organs of generation; (...) has neither body hair (...) nor ardour for his female (...).” And in terms not very dissimilar to those often used by anti-American critics two hundred years later, he concluded that “their heart is frozen, their society cold, their empire cruel.”

Although the idea originated with Buffon, he was by no means an exception in his loathing of America’s alleged inferiority. The most radical proponent of the degeneracy thesis at the time was Cornelius de Pauw, a francophone Dutch clergyman living in Germany, whose three-volume study of America, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, published in Berlin, in 1768, contended that “it is a great and terrible spectacle to see one half of the globe so disfavoured by nature that everything found there is degenerate or monstrous.” It was de Pauw who insisted on the predictability of an accelerated process of physical and mental degeneration of the settlers in America: no sooner would they debark from their ships than they would begin the process of decay and regression.

This was the main reason for America not to be able to produce an ideal of civilization of any merit. Searching inspiration in de Pauw’s reflections on
America and Americans, both native and of European descent, the Abbé Guillaume-Thomas François Raynal (1713-1796), the otherwise celebrated author of one of the most important texts of eighteenth-century anti-colonialism (Histoire des Deux Indes, de 1772-74), began by supporting the American Revolution. In his 1781 pamphlet, Révolution d’Amérique, Raynal justified American independence, advised the newborn United States to avoid the snares that had plagued Europe since the Renaissance (greed, empire-building and religious intolerance), but felt himself obliged to conclude that the low level of civilization in America had not yet enabled the new nation to produce a good poet, an able mathematician, one man of genius in a single art or a single science.22

Obviously, nothing, on the surface at least, had degenerated, was degenerating or would be likely to degenerate in the foreseeable future in America. Nature, as Alexander Hamilton implied in his response to this in the last paragraph of The Federalist’s No. 11, was the same on both sides of the Atlantic:

I shall briefly observe, that our situation invites and our interests prompt us to aim at an ascendant in the system of American affairs. The world may politically, as well as geographically, be divided into four parts, each having a distinct set of interests. Unhappily for the other three, Europe, by her arms and by her negotiations, by force and by fraud, has, in different degrees, extended her dominion over them all. Africa, Asia, and America, have successively felt her domination. The superiority she has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the Mistress of the World, and to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit. Men admired as profound philosophers have, in direct terms, attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority, and have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere. Facts have too long supported these arrogant pretensions of the Europeans. It belongs to us to vindicate the honor of the human race, and to teach that assuming brother, moderation. Union will enable us to do it. Disunion will add another victim to his

22 See Abbé Raynal, Révolution d’Amerique, Londres, Lockyer Davies MDCCLXXXI, especially 162-171.
triumphs. Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness! Let the thirteen States, bound together in a strict and indissoluble Union, concur in erecting one great American system, superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence, and able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world!\(^{23}\)

But what Hamilton’s counterargument could not entirely invalidate was the contention that both life from a strictly biological point of view and the political system of America were inferior. And it was precisely this claim that lay at the heart of the second stratum of anti-American feeling, developed by a number of Romantic poets and philosophers in the early part of the nineteenth century. These thinkers took on the theme of the (inevitable) decadence of America and Americans and gave it a new philosophical turn, arguing that it followed not from the dismal characteristics of the physical environment, but from the underlying principles on which the United States had been founded. Anti-Americanism now became what it has remained ever since, a doctrine applicable exclusively to the United States, and not to any other nation of the New World.

This exogenous process preceded and completed the endogenous transformation Sacvan Bercovitch so forcefully demonstrated in *The Office of “The Scarlet Letter,”* by which the United States appropriated the name “America” for itself, symbolically, during the process that led the triumphant liberal model to a position of cultural, political and economic prevalence. The American Literary Renaissance that occurred between the Revolution and the Civil War may in the end be interpreted as the aesthetic triumph of a process that championed the liberal tenets of open competition, private enterprise, personal rights, free opportunity and individualism.\(^{24}\)

The Romantics’ symbolic construction of America was more political in kind than purely anthropological, since it owed something to the proba-


bly precipitate association of the American and the French Revolutions. Despite the enthusiasm with which European Romanticism received the outbreak of the Revolution in France, the events that followed came to be seen as an attempt to remake constitutions and societies on the basis of abstract and universal principles of both Nature and Science. The United States, conceived of, albeit erroneously, as the precursor of the French Revolution, was often implicated in this critique. In the wake of Edmund Burke’s seemingly non-contradictory arguments “for” the American Revolution and “against” the Revolution in France, these poets’ and philosophers’ major claim was that nothing created or fashioned under the guidance of universal principles or with the assistance of rational Science was solid or could long endure.

In this particular context, the wide range of philosophical outlooks embodied in political Romanticism might be subsumed under the concept of Counter-Enlightenment, a name first given by Isaiah Berlin to those currents of thought that opposed the rationalistic and liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. Berlin’s purpose in a series of essays was the critical rediscovery of the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder and especially Johann Georg Hamann (the so-called “Magus of the North,” to whom Berlin virtually attributed the origins of modern irrationalism), and an account both of their appeal, so foreign to the Enlightenment, and of their consequences all along the 19th and 20th centuries. For Berlin and his followers, the Counter-Enlightenment embodies a rather sceptic and/or pessimistic lineage within the Western intellectual tradition that pyrrhonomically acknowledges the fundamental relativism of cultural values and their endless conflicts with Reason, as well as a deep-seated dependence on mysticism, neo-Medieval forms of religious thought and ultimately irrationalism. Although its standpoint may be looked on as a corrective to certain mechanistic strands of Enlightenment thought (for instance, La Mettrie’s mechanistic materialism,

who conceived of the human being simply as a machine), the truth is that Counter-Enlightenment gave a decisive contribution to the disparagement of Reason as a supposedly universal tool, unable to fit the whole of human experience without Procrustean results (a lesson learned, as we shall see, by most of its post-modernist progeny).

In the most extreme cases (Joseph de Maistre is now the case in point), authors of the Romantic period went so far as to deny the existence of “man” or “humankind,” such as in the Declaration of Independence’s statement that “all men are created equal.” In a typical outburst of nationalistic feeling so typical of the mental outlook of European Romanticism, Maistre declared that “there is no such thing in this world as man; I have seen in my life French, Italians, and Russians... but as for man, I declare that I have never met one in my life; if he exists, it is entirely without my knowledge” (Maistre 97). According to this point of view, not only was the Declaration of Independence based on flawed premises, but so too was the American Constitution, namely, with its proposition that men could establish a new government: “All that is new in [the American] Constitution, all that results from common deliberation, is the most fragile thing in the world: one could not bring together more symptoms of weakness and decay.”

Instead of human reason and rational deliberation, Romantic thinkers placed their confidence in the organic growth of distinct and separate communities. In a word: they put their trust in History. But by surviving – and then, worse: by prospering – the United States ended up by refuting the charges of the inherent weakness of societies founded with the sole aid of Reason. The Romantics then went on to contend that America’s survival was at the cost of everything deep or profound. Nothing constructed on the thin soil of Enlightenment principles could sustain a genuine culture. The Austrian romantic poet born in Hungary Nikolaus Lenau (1802-50) provided the classic summary of the Romantic mistrust regarding the Anglophone New World when he stated:

With the word Bodenlosigkeit [rootlessness] I think I am able to indicate the general character of all American institutions; what we call Fatherland is here only a property insurance scheme.

In other words, there was no real community in America, no real Volk. America’s culture had in no sense come up organically, so to say, “from
within.” Its most distinguishable characteristic was its dull materialism: “The American knows nothing; he seeks nothing but money; he has no ideas.” Then came Lenau’s haunting image, reminiscent of Pauw’s portrait of America as locus horribilis, or the final wasteland of the human species: “the true land of the end, the outer edge of man.”

Even America’s celebrated idea of freedom was seen by many Romantics as a dangerous artifice. For them, American society was the very picture of a deadening conformity. Heinrich Heine gave a sarcastic expression to this sentiment:

I have sometimes thought to sail
To America the Free
To that Freedom Stable where
All the boors live equally. (Heine, Poems 633)

America, as Heine put it in his prose writing, was equated to a “monstrous prison of freedom, (...) where the most repulsive of all tyrants, the populace, hold vulgar sway” (Heine, Romantic 263).

The masses, Heine remarked. Which masses? Immigrants flooding in from all over the world, giving rise to one of the most powerful legends of the America’s image of itself: the celebrated “melting pot.” It is no coincidence that the third stratum of thought in the global rejection of America made its apparition under the theme of race and the spectre of racial impurity. Although the walls of suspicion, distrust and bigotry are arguably as old as Humanity itself, the main responsible for the elaboration of a holistic theory of race in modern Europe was Arthur de Gobineau, a man of special interest also for Portuguese and Portuguese-speaking people, on account of his stay as a diplomat in Brazil (a country he disliked and deprecated) and his friendship with Emperor Peter II (“D. Pedro II”).

Gobineau in Brazil, unlike Tocqueville in North America, failed to see

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that the absence of a hard work ethic in the tropics was probably due to the institution of slavery. While Tocqueville, comparing the states of Ohio (a free state) and Kentucky (a slavocracy), wrote intelligent observations on the damage caused by slavery in the South of the United States, where it induced apathy in the ruling elite and hatred among the governed, Gobineau attributed the wickedness he said he found in Brazil to miscegenation. Rio, he said, was like a beautiful girl, uncultured and savage, unable to write or read, like a luxurious landscape surrounded by lush forests, albeit totally devoid of “moral nature.” In such a context of torpor and drowsiness, Gobineau argued, only Emperor Peter II seemed a flimsy reminder of civilization.

At the heart of Gobineau’s racialist theory as stated in his one thousand page Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races, published in 1853 and 1855, was the contention that a mixing of the races was said to be either impossible, because it could not sustain biological fecundity, or detrimental to the progress of mankind, because it would in the end bring about a process of levelling of all human beings, with the “higher” races being worsened as a result of mingling with the “lower” ones.

Gobineau took race as the active principle of History and argued that the Aryans, whom he considered the purest of all the races, were allowing themselves to be impaired in Europe. America became an important focus of his analysis, since, as he explained, many at the time championed America as the “Great White Hope,” the nation in which the Aryan peoples (Anglo-Saxons and Nordics) would reinvigorate themselves and reassert their “rightful” dominance in the History of the Western world. From this point of view, while America’s formal political principle was Democracy, its real underlying foundation was that of Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy.

But in the end Gobineau was persuaded that this hope was misleading. The universalistic idea of natural equality in America was in fact giving rise to a “democracy of blood,” in which the very idea of “race,” which was meant to be a term of distinction, was rapidly withering away. To put it brutally: Europe was exporting its “inferior” races to the New World and these had already begun the process of mixing with the Anglo-Saxons, putting an end to Gobineau’s dream of an Aryan racial superiority transferred to America.

The natural result of the democratic idea, Gobineau argued, was
amalgamation. America was in fact creating a new ethnic group, the last ethnic group in the History of mankind, the human race – which was no race at all. The eradication of the racial factor marked the end of History. America presented a deplorable prospect of a society composed of creatures of the greatest mediocrity in all fields, both in physical strength and in intellectual capacities.

We know all too well where racialist thinking led to in the first half of the twentieth century. Following Giselher Wirsing, in his 1942 book about America, Der maßlose Kontinent,27 the Nazi wartime propaganda conflated anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism, fusing two terms of abuse into one genocidal slander: “Uncle Sam has been transformed into Uncle Shylock.” Hitler himself once asked: “What is America, but millionaires, beauty queens, stupid records, and Hollywood?” Demonstrating that Buffon’s degeneracy theory was as appealing to the far right of the thirties and forties as it had been to the eighteenth century, Hitler concluded: “Transfer [a German] to Miami and you make a degenerate out of him – in other words – an American.”28

Considerations of race managed to find their way, often unconsciously, into subsequent theorizing about America. Some argue that the underlying principles of the American social order have produced, first and foremost, a brutal repression of the “Other:” the Indian, the African, the chicano, each and every population layer outside the sphere of the WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) élite. Conversely, it is sometimes said that the process of enfranchisement and equalizing opportunities for the various disadvantaged social groups during the era of heavy industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not proceed rapidly enough, if at all, especially regarding African Americans. America has been accused of being slow, if not overtly hypocritical, in its promise to eliminate race as a basis of social and political judgement.


And it was precisely during this process of heavy industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the fourth layer in the construction of anti-American feeling abruptly made its apparition. By the turn of the century, as the technological colossus across the Atlantic began to outpace the great powers of Europe and compete with them in the imperial arena, some began to feel and to fear that the United States might at some time in the future impose its peculiar blend of capitalism, Democracy and Puritan work ethics worldwide. Worse, their own people might prefer the boorish American mass consumption society to the cultured albeit sluggish class societies of traditional Europe. In short, the elites of “old Europe” feared “Americanization.” From now on, America came to be seen as the starting place of the rising automation of mass production, the growing importance of consumption and the general mechanization of human life. The metaphorical characterization of the underlying methods and mentality that propped up this system was once again one of abnormal development – this time in the direction of a gargantuan society with an unbridled drive for expansion. Nietzsche was an early exponent of this view, arguing that America sought the reduction of everything to the quantifiable and the financially measurable in its effort to dominate and enrich.29 In his perspective, the distinctive vice of America and Americans, that is, the haste with which they work, was already beginning to contaminate Europe and to spread a sort of cultural emptiness all over the continent:


In Nietzsche’s frequent use of biological metaphors in his cultural criticism, the reach of American culture was for first time ever likened to a contagion, a form of lethal disease. Its progress in Europe seemed unavoidable: the mechanization of work and workers in the industrial age would in the end bring about the mechanization of the mind itself. The faith of the Americans was becoming a sign of decadence against which Nietzsche warned in the most vigorous terms: the “mass man” across the Atlantic had already a one-dimensional notion of material progress and scientific advance so deeply inculcated that it had become the only measure of human existence.

Nietzsche’s followers took a further step towards modern anti-Americanism and transformed the idea of America into an abstract category. Arthur Moeller Van den Bruck (1876-1925), the German culture historian best known for having popularized the notion of “The Third Reich” and for managing to influence German right extremists in the fight against the Versailles Treaty in the early twenties, proposed in his essay Die Deutschen: Unsere Menschengeschichte, published in 1905, the concept of Amerikanertum (Americaness). In Van den Bruck’s vocabulary, Amerikanertum was a notion which ought to be understood both geographically and “spiritually,” since it marked the crucial step by which Humanity became no longer dependent upon the earth and assumed the right to over-exploit its resources. This concept embraced a mentality of dominance and exploitation on an ever-expanding scale, precisely what later came to be called the mentality of technologism.

In short, in Nietzsche’s and Van den Bruck’s bleak appraisal of the social and political dimensions of American society, technology might have begun just as a process of modernization and rationalization of the methods of production and work in the industrial era, but then, in a wider and much more general sense, the revenge of unintended consequences made it nothing but a relentless striving after material welfare. And the problem lay precisely in the fact that the advancement of the outward, material welfare

of men and women did not seem to satisfy directly their inner, spiritual or metaphysical needs. In the beginning it may promise happiness, but in the end it reduces itself to the most abundant possible satisfaction of all those desires that can be satisfied by the things of the outer world.

This critique of the technological civilization embodied in America (or in “America,” as universal symbol for progress, development and modernization) gave rise to the fifth and final layer in the construction of the concept of the New World as dystopia: soullessness, absence of historical sense and rampant consumerism. This latest stratum was the creation of Martin Heidegger, who, like his predecessors in Germany, offered a metaphorical definition of the concept of America, once again, as it were, tied to the cultural identity of the United States, but aloof from the “historical” United States. In Heidegger’s philosophy, Americanism was “the still unfolding and not yet full or completed essence of the emerging monstrousness of modern times.” Heidegger was clearly less interested in an accurate description of the cultural dimensions at work in American civilization than in fashioning a vivid symbol for mere “technologism.” For him, America was the place and the spirit of the regression of humanity to its very negation, in a word, a site of catastrophe, or Katastrophenhaft.32

This notion seems less a difference in generational sensibility than a difference in standpoint. In his earliest and perhaps best known passages on America, Heidegger echoed in 1935 the prevalent view of Europe being in a middle position:

Europe lies today in a great pincer, squeezed between Russia on the one side and America on the other. From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same, with the same dreary technological frenzy and the same unrestricted organization of the average man.33

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Far now from its European origins, America was conceived of by Heidegger as a symbol of desolation, homelessness and technological emptiness. Even though it was the European thinkers themselves, as the originators of modern science, who were largely to blame for this development, Europe, with its emphasis on tradition, had managed to stop short of its full execution. It was in America and Russia that the idea of quantity totally divorced from quality had taken over and grown, as Heidegger put it, “into a boundless et cetera of indifference and always the sameness.” The result in both countries was “an active onslaught that destroys all rank and every world-creating impulse (...). This is the onslaught of what we call the demonic, in the sense of destructive evil.”

America, in Heidegger’s view, represented the greatest and most significant threat to Europe, also because of its insensitivity to the general ideas of History, Time and Being. This has added a new level of argumentation to the anti-American mindset. Americanism was “the most dangerous form of boundlessness, because it appears in a middle class way of life mixed with Christianity, and all this in an atmosphere that lacks completely any sense of history.” When the United States declared war on Germany, Heidegger wrote:

> We know today that the Anglo-Saxon world of Americanism has resolved to annihilate Europe, that is, the homeland [die Heimat], and that means: the commencement of the Western world. Whatever has the character of commencement is indestructible. America’s entry into this planetary war is not its entry into history; rather it is already the ultimate American act of American ahistoricity and self-devastation. For this act is the renunciation of commencement, and a decision in favor of that which is without commencement. (Heidegger, History 54-55)

In creating this vision of America, Heidegger not only expressed his abhorrence of a futuristic nightmare of what he took for technology out of control and “oblivion of Being” (Seinsvergessenheit), but also managed to include in it a premonition of many of the challenges of late capitalist society, from the rising importance of instantaneous communications to an indifference to the environment, not to mention the reduction of culture to a commodity for passive consumption. He was especially interested in consumerism, which he thought was emblematic of the spirit of the age:
The circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld. (Heidegger, End 107)

America as “unworld” began to be looked on as the embodiment of the reign of the Ersatz, encouraging the absorption of the distinctive and genuine into the trivial and the fake – worse still, into the simulacra of a counterfeit world, as it were, devoid of its own being.

In his sweeping survey of the legacy of two centuries of anti-modern thinking both by European and non-European ideologues, Richard Wolin notes that Heidegger’s horror at the possibility of the American Schein rule out the European (and specifically German) Sein quickly disseminated among the intelligentsia after the Second World War, despite the fact that Heidegger’s political views were subject to harsh criticism because of his early and open support of Nazism.34

Following the war, Heidegger’s thought, subtly freed from of any taint of Fascist leanings, was embraced by many existentialists – in France and elsewhere. And it was through the writings of authors like Jean-Paul Sartre, first, and, in a second wave, the structuralist and poststructuralist maîtres à penser, such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard or Baudrillard, that the teachings and the pervasive influence of Heidegger were acritically passed on to the next generations of Europeans and of the European intelligentsia, at least until the scandal created by the publication of Victor Farias’s essay Heidegger et le nazisme in 1987.35

Seldom in the history of philosophy has a thinker attracted such extreme assessments as has Martin Heidegger – from, on the one hand, being regarded by some commentators (namely, Jacques Derrida and

Richard Rorty) as perhaps the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century
to, at the other extreme, Oxford philosopher A. J. Ayer’s famously contemptuous dismissal of Heidegger as a “charlatan.” Even if we choose a sort of middle term and consider him as “the most complex and obscure of all philosophers” (Watts xi), the truth remains that throughout his voluminous philosophical output, Heidegger’s invectives against “technology,” “liberalism,” “Jews,” and “America,” together with his revulsion at modernity’s “oblivion of Being,” avowedly paved the way for much of the post-modern imagination.

No one today would dare to dismiss the seriousness of some of the contemporary challenges that have been raised against “technological modernity” and the tensions it brings about. To provide just one striking example, America has been widely criticized either for being too modern (it led, for instance, the world’s new information technology and communications revolution in recent decades), or for not being modern enough (a large portion of the population is “still” religious, for example). But, in spite of this, the troubling indebtedness of some of the major “anti-modern” (we should, perhaps, say: “counter-Enlightenment”) themes of Heidegger’s philosophy to the worldview of National Socialism did not prevent it from being the genetic blueprint for post-modern thought.

This is particularly impressive in the work of Jean Baudrillard, the main post-modern theoretician of post-modernism – and of contemporary civilization as the prototypical era of the simulacrum. Drawing loosely on the motif of the Seinsvergessenheit, Baudrillard turned upside-down the relation between philosophy and the world he found in Heidegger’s writings so as to anchor the post-modern condition either in an disgust at authority, signification, and canonical narratives, or a tendency towards parody, quotation, self-referentiality, and mechanical self-reproduction. During the last quarter of century, such a nihilistic philosophical agenda has proved


itself the philosophy of an age of blatant anti-humanism, sense of collapsed signification, philosophical exhaustion and, what is more, knowledge as self-defeated capacity for action.

Baudrillard takes consumer society as his point of departure and puts forward the idea that we live in a time in which models or copies spontaneously self-generate without any originals. If we want to do justice to the dynamics of late capitalism, characterized by unprecedented economic affluence and a demand artificially stimulated by advertising, we cannot overlook the fact that the old Marxian concept of superstructure (the circulation of cultural goods as commodities, as well as the increasing global standardization of cultural goods themselves) has become the main source of knowledge, power and influence in the hands of the globalized elites in transition to the twenty-first century.

It seems that Schein has finally taken its revenge on Sein. Just as Heidegger felt that, in contrast to the respectful ancient Greek conception of Being, modern technological society had fostered a purely manipulative attitude that left human life completely bereft of meaning, so Baudrillard postulates that “Hyperreality” – that is, the proliferation of images, sounds and signs generated by the media – has replaced what we once referred to as “reality.” The post-modern cultural artefact is “in itself” (if we may allow ourselves to employ such an expression) merely an artifice.

And in Baudrillard’s estimation, America represents the extreme of modern civilization as pretence, a wasteland of copies of copies, the final stage of civilization – or, the sign of its own absence. How not to recall here Lenau’s characterization of America as the true land of the end, the outer edge of man?

The American “desert of the real” is “an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance” (Baudrillard, America 5, 7). Speed, the quintessential American feature, is crucial in Baudrillard’s cartography of America, because “speed creates pure objects” (6). Television “reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one

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38 On Baudrillard, despite its age, see Douglas Kellner, Jean Baudrillard: from Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond, Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1989.
at all, delivering its messages indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared)” (49-50). That’s why America is, according to the author of *Simulacra and Simulation*, “the only remaining primitive society” (7). Having recourse to the vocabulary of the traditional American *ethos*, Baudrillard concludes that America “is utopia (...) achieved (...) and anti-utopia being achieved: the anti-utopia of unreason, (...) of the indeterminacy of the subject and of language, of the neutralization of all values, of the death of culture” (7). The death of culture seems mirrored by the fact that art and life seem to have traded places: Baudrillard observes that “in America, the cinema is true (...) the whole mode of life is cinematographic: life is cinema.” And the same might be said of dystopia’s last deception, entertainment. According to Baudrillard, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (*Simulations* 25).

This outlandish vision is, perhaps, Baudrillard’s variation on the theme of the end of history, or *posthistoire*. His assault on modernity embodied in America, where media-generated signs have not only become more important than reality, but finished by replacing it altogether, is based upon the assumption that all attempts to transcend the anti-culture of this teratological nation, made of technological special effects, are destined to failure and will end up in unprecedented chaos. There is nothing left in the reign of dystopia but the apogee of post-modern cultural suicide.

In this regard, all the hostility America motivates eventually derives, first, from the notion that human actors are powerless to implement meaningful social change: “Human rights have been won everywhere,” Baudrillard says, “[t]he world is almost entirely liberated; there is nothing left to fight for.” But, second, it also stems from its absolute lack of historical memory: “[America] exorcises the question of origins, she does not cultivate the origins or mythical authenticity, she has neither a past nor a founding truth” (*America* 77, 84-85, 112).

The epitome of this sort of post-modern cultural fatalism, of this nightmarish vision of America as historical *tabula rasa*, was the thesis presented in Baudrillard’s essay *The Gulf War did not take place*, published in
the aftermath of the first Gulf War, in which the author claims that the “real” war was nothing but a stage direction, a minor detail, in the grandiose production of the “hyperreal” war – that of media consultants, opinion makers and CNN. Baudrillard’s simulacrum thesis goes as far as to suggest that the object of his own study is properly speaking a non-object, whereby it should be read “as a science fiction novel,” in the tradition of “Borges’ chronicling of cultures that never existed” (Illusion 64).

We might reasonably think that the self-inflicted demise of Baudrillard’s postmodern sociology of culture and its equation with the fictional discourse of Jorge Luis Borges would be the logical consequence of his conception of America as triumphant dystopia. A non-object, or object as simulacrum, gave rise to a non-theory, or a simulacrum of a theory. But the nihilistic implications of his thesis have surpassed themselves when Baudrillard reacted in a condoning mood to the events of September 11, 2001. In his opinion, the assault on the Twin Towers was the justified answer of the wretched of the earth to the challenges posed by American hegemonical power in the globalized societies of late capitalism. Though the self-declared authors of the attacks were nominally responsible for its execution, the truth is that it was an act longed for and secretly considered necessary by a “we” Baudrillard attempts to make coincide with Humanity at large:

(...) haven’t we dreamt of this event, hasn’t the entire world, without exception, dreamt of it; no one could not dream of the destruction of a power that had become hegemonic to such a point. (...) In essence, it was [the authors of the attacks] who committed the deed, but it is we who wished for it.39

In much the same vein, but pushing the thesis still further, the psychoanalytic reading put forward by Slavoj Zizek underlines that, with the September 11 attacks, “America got it fantasized about.” Zizek’s Schadenfreude caused a stir all over the world and, specifically, in the world of social theory, when he stated that contemporary organized violence directed against America as symbol of cosmic injustice should be seen as a mere tipping

point of the symbolic, as an act of “traversing the phantasm,” as just another way of saying that America (and the West, in general) finally reaped the disastrous consequences it/they had sowed for so long. In this line of thinking, evil returns not as a projection of what we try to drive out from our conscience, but as an indelible part of us and an indelible part of our own guilt. In Zizek’s own words:

Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence.40

All this seems to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that (at least, some) post-modernist thinkers, like Baudrillard and Zizek, frustrated by Democracy’s shortcomings, fell (and still fall) prey to a fatal attraction for the most reactionary critics of political liberalism of the first half of the twentieth century. These critics went to great lengths to highlight the tension, if not the contradiction, between the claims of Reason and the unreasonable character of existing social institutions. In a way, post-structuralism’s severe criticism of the eighteenth-century Europe philosophical project and endorsement of Counter-Enlightenment views highlights the idea that the Enlightenment itself was rooted in royal patronage, repressive government, despotism (no matter how illuminated), and authoritarian social systems. A lasting example of this line of reasoning is Michel Foucault, who in many of his writings contended that the treatment of the insane during the Classical Era shows that liberal notions of compassionate treatment were not universally adhered to, but instead that the age of Reason had to construct an image of “Unreason” against which to take an opposing stand.

Notwithstanding, postmodernism’s right-wing intellectual references among the authoritarian literati, artists and philosophers of the twenties and the thirties disclose a dark political lineage, whose hidden affinities constitute the guiding thread to the dystopian visions of America I tried to sum up in this essay (however briefly). In their hostility towards Reason and

Democracy, the postmodernist proponents of an America as symbol for the decadence of the consumerist societies of late capitalism (where “real social life” itself, according to Zizek, somehow acquires the features of a spectral show exerting ruthless violence and destruction over the “barbarian” Outside) betray a notorious strategic allegiance – they tread the dangerous ground where, in times of disruption, far Left and far Right, oddly enough, eventually cross their paths.

As I also tried to demonstrate, the phenomenon is not new. For us, Europeans, America has long assumed the form of a nightmare, a degenerate image of Europe’s own identity. We may wonder whether this dystopian vision reveals more about the European mind than it does about America, as it betrays the anxieties and obsessions of a European political culture confronted with the threats of modernity, progress, and the unsettling spectre of democratization. Alexis de Tocqueville understood quite well that the success of Democracy in the New World sounded the death knell for the ancien régime. Thus, defenders of the European counterrevolutionary tradition firmly believed that by disparaging the newborn republic, they were simultaneously reinforcing the cause of the party of order at home. To achieve their goal, they got hold of types of invective against the New World based on its fictive geographical disadvantages, racial shortcomings, and genetic abnormalities, liable to affect both the native American populations and the settlers of European origin.

A century later, America’s participation in the First World War under the banner of Wilsonian internationalism presented a qualitatively new threat for the enemies of open society and the advocates of Counter-Enlightenment. It seemed as though a full-blown America now felt itself strong enough to dare to spread its ideals by economic pressure, by its power-based approach to foreign policy, and by the channels of international diplomacy. Leading critics of the Enlightenment – notably, Martin Heidegger – would soon fall under the spell of Fascism, which in the twenties and thirties had become the first and foremost ideological resource in Germany liable to counteract the advancement of liberalism, individualism, and freedom of thought.

Although Democracies emerged triumphant in the wake of the Second World War, in many ways their victory remained a Pyrrhic success, for the
conflict also sounded the death knell for the Enlightenment assumptions about the necessary correlation between Truth, Progress, and Reason (itself considered by Counter-Enlightenment theoreticians and its post-modernist progeny alike, not as a precondition of political freedom, but as an instrument of enslavement).

This was the first war in the History of Mankind in which civilian casualties outnumbered those among the armed forces, leaving a death toll of fifty million people. How could such faith in Truth, Reason, and Progress be maintained in the face of Auschwitz? How could such faith be maintained in the presence of the spectre of nuclear annihilation after Hiroshima and Nagasaki? How could such faith be maintained in the face of the seemingly unstoppable “moral decay” of liberal democracy, all of which had emerged from the very heart of Western culture?

Followed by the traumas of the Cold War and decolonization, these events gave critics of the Enlightenment a renewed strength. During the 1960’s a new generation of vocal critics of Democracy made its appearance, above all in France, where the major intellectual event of the post-war period was the rehabilitation of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger by the maîtres penseurs of poststructuralism, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard. During this process of appropriation, the Counter-Enlightenment mindset that had been an exclusive of the European Right up till then came to permeate the cultural and ideological stances of the post-modern Left. Whereas the Left’s previous targets had been social injustice and class inequality, the postmodernists, inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, adopted a totalitarian rhetoric of “total critique,” directing their arsenal of philosophical arguments against “reason,” “humanism,” “liberalism” and Europe’s “irreversible” cultural decline – the same targets that, for long, had been privileged objects of contempt for the advocates of the most reactionary movements among the European Right.

In conclusion, the philosophical proficiency of this penchant for “Enlightenment bashing” demonstrated by post-modernism may at first impress by its overwhelmingly negative and, in some respects, rhetorically persuasive criticism of Western civilization as a whole. But after careful revision, the “seduction of unreason,” that is, the almost unanimously
acknowledged thesis that the Enlightenment impetus has exhausted itself, especially when subtly transmuted into a phobic view of America, a disapproval of open societies in general and a systematic downgrading of Reason, may in the end portend the collapse of any liberating project whatsoever – from modest proposals in favour of “reforms from within” to the (necessary) denunciation of transgressions of democratic rules by Democracies themselves.

If political liberalism has become the unsurpassable political horizon of our time, encompassing a set of ideas and practices, from human rights to the rule of law, through popular sovereignty, the doctrine of checks and balances, even, perhaps, the civic virtues of classical Republicanism, we had better not lose sight of the contribution given by the American Revolution and the History of the United States (no mean contribution, by any standards) to the ushering in of an era of unparalleled emancipation in the History of Mankind.

After all, more than fifty years after their proclamation, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, famously outlined in his State of the Union Address delivered to the 77th Congress of the United States on January 6th, 1941 – freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear – should still serve as a reminder that America may have been a historical creation (politically and philosophically) devised not entirely by the wrong people, not entirely with the wrong ideas, and not entirely for the wrong reasons.

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“Chagall is for shopgirls:” Art and Memory in Alice Munro’s Short Story “Soon”

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Alice Munro was born in Ontario in 1931 and has published twelve books of short stories between 1968 and 2005. Acclaimed at first as a “Canadian writer” (Woodcock 295), her work has increasingly become appreciated for its sophisticated stylistic qualities and structural designs. Often compared to Chekhov, Munro’s short stories are praised for their “denseness and precision of language” (Roy 284) and their almost photographic power (York 49-60). The high visual precision of Munro’s realism and her pictorial imagination yield special and temporary dimensions of mystery and suggestive power which have been compared to magical realism or hyperrealism. The mingling of different levels of reality in Munro’s stories has also been seen in terms of T. S. Eliot’s conception of the poet’s mind capable of amalgamating disparate experiences into new wholes (Martin 190).1 If, as Philip Larkin says, a short story is either a poem, a novel or an anecdote” (Larkin 66),2 Munro’s stories may be considered poems, highly wrought art objects able to evoke wide expansions of time and space where characters interact and words and images come

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1 “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes” (Eliot, “Metaphysical” 287). Cited in full in W. R. Martin, op. cit., p. 190.

2 Larkin’s actual words are: “I think a short story should be either a poem or a novel. Unless it’s just an anecdote.”
together to house what she herself calls “an emotional resonance… an exactness of resonance.”

Alice Munro’s latest collection dates from 2005, and was published under the title Runaway. Stories (London: Chatto & Windus). The book contains eight stories, three of which form a triptych linked as they are through the same female character, Juliet. The first story of the triptych is called “Chance” and is set in 1965 when the twenty two year old Juliet is deterred from writing a doctoral dissertation in Classics by a chance meeting with Eric, a prawn fisher with whom she settles in Whale Bay, on the West Coast of Canada. The second story, “Soon,” presents Juliet four years later, in 1969, when she returns to her home town in the rural east to introduce her thirteen month old baby Penelope to her parents. The last part, “Silence,” begins twenty years later and covers a period of more or less a decade. When the story begins, Eric has been dead for some years and Juliet is a well-known media figure searching – unsuccessfully – for her daughter Penelope who has joined a neo-pagan sect. This revised version of the Odyssey ends with Juliet living alone: she works part time in a café and continues to “investigate” her Greek authors.

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3 Alice Munro to John Metcalf, “A conversation with Alice Munro.” Journal of Canadian Fiction 1, nº 4 (Fall 1972): 54-62. Cited in W. R. Martin, op. cit., 187. John Metcalf further comments: “Always when I read your writing I find it operates on me in very much the same way that poetry does… That there are levels of meaning and compression that are suddenly packed into something, yet, it always seems to flow very naturally from something acutely observed in the first place.” cf. Martin, op. cit., 192.

4 The three stories were first published in 2004 in The New Yorker (June 14 & 21, 2004), 130-183, where they appeared as “Three stories by Alice Munro: ‘Chance;’ ‘Soon;’ ‘Silence.’”

5 While the first two stories have actual dates, respectively 1965 and 1969, the last story indicates that Penelope will be celebrating her twenty first birthday on the 20th of June. The very precise indications of time and place contribute to project the dimensions of life that escape concrete appropriation.

6 “Investigations” is the word emphasized in the text: “The word studies does not seem to describe very well what she does – investigations would be better.” Alice Munro, “Silence”, Runaway, 158.
In this paper, I want to look at the central piece of the triptych: “Soon,” the narrative of Juliet’s first encounter with her parents after the birth of her baby Penelope.

To isolate a story which is the central piece of a tripartite structure means to disregard the many threads that link the three narratives together. But here I would like to observe how the story confronts the simultaneity inherent in visual perception with the workings of time, a confrontation which in the story is presented as an opposition between the art of painting and the art of narrative.

The story “Soon” is about thirty-nine pages long and divided through asterisks in six great blocks. Each of these parts is further subdivided in smaller sequences of various lengths separated by blanks. In total there are twenty separated chunks of narrative, some taking up six pages, others less than one. Thus and at the outset, the spatial dimension of the story is emphasized.

The story is a third person narrative and allows the reader to see the ironies between the point of view of the narrator and of the main character, Juliet, through whom most of the observations are filtered. The narrative concentrates on the first days of Juliet’s visit to her parents, Sam and Sara. Further characters are Irene, a socially underprivileged young woman who helps out in the household and Ron, a not very bright minister. The many incidents and encounters which occur during the few days of the visit occupy eighteen of the twenty sequences. The remaining two, respectively the first and the last, present huge ellipses in time which frame the core of the story with two opposing views.

The introductory part is a retrospective view of Juliet, pregnant with Penelope, nineteen months before the visit to the parents takes place. The scene zooms in on Juliet standing in the gift shop of the Vancouver Art Gallery, lost in the observation of a print of Chagall’s picture, “I and the village.” Actually, the first paragraph of the story consists in a verbal description of the painting, a literal rendering of the character’s vision. There is no introductory hint that the text on the page is a rhetorical device, an *ekphrasis*, so that from the very beginning the reader is presented with something which is not what it appears to be and which he did not expect: a painting and not a story. Consequently he is forced to readjust his first reading and to reconsider first
impression. The reader receives, as it were, an illuminating blow about the nature of artistic representation and he experiences rather than understands the difficulty in distinguishing between what he sees and what he thinks he sees. As such, the reader is plunged into the main concern of the story: Juliet’s readings and misreadings of what she thinks of as familiar, as “home,” the alienating affects of painful confrontations, the need for re-interpretations, the open-ended unresolved nature of the stories which try to make sense of pain and estrangement.

The concluding part is only one page long and presents a bird’s-eye view of a much older Juliet who, years after the death of her mother and the remarriage of her father, looks down on her younger self. This scene of Joycean epiphany reaches back to the beginning through a fundamental re-interpretation of the initial view and draws a frame around the central part of the story as if it were a pictorial composition.

The middle part of the narrative is thus foregrounded as a series of vivid scenes that show the clash between the images of Juliet’s eager anticipations and the opacity of reality which cannot be made to conform to its imaginative projections. In scene after scene, the reader is able to observe how Juliet’s blissful anticipations are frustrated while she watches the ravages that time has caused in her parents: Sara has become severely disabled, Sam is irritable and both parents defer to Irene on whom they have come to depend.

These facts are imbedded in precise historical and cultural traditions and convey a dimension of documentary truth. For instance, the sexual emancipation of the sixties and the deep conservative mentality of rural Canada play an important role in the way the characters see themselves and judge others. Juliet’s parents can neither place Penelope’s father nor adjust

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7 The choice of the names Sam and Sara, evocations of their oddness and a reference to their belonging “to a church not represented in town” (118), may indicate a Jewish background in line with Chagall’s picture. Through the romantic connotations of the name Juliet, the character may thus be seen as set apart from her parent’s background. It is significant that the name Penelope is presented as a deliberate choice in line with Juliet’s interests in Greek literature. May one conclude that the name Juliet was Sara’s choice in line with romantic notions picked up in magazines like “Vogue” which is mentioned in the text (89).
to the image of their learned daughter in a liaison with a prawn fisher. On the other hand, Juliet thinks of her parents as cosmopolitan and broadminded and is appalled when she discovers that they are deeply troubled about her non-married state and the fact that she has a daughter out of wed-lock, a “love-child.” She later discovers that her father was in a sense compelled to give up his job as a teacher because of this.

The pain that results from these confrontations heaps up in incident after incident and finds no redemption in the narrative which limits itself to register the scenes, leaving blank spaces full of unresolved resonances. There literally is no time and space for the shocks to be digested and re-integrated into new, albeit provisional, sense-making narratives. Characters and readers are thus caught up in the immediacy of the moment, unable to find a breathing distance that will allow for fresh points of view and for the workings of interpretation, crucified as it were on the tensions and the sharp edges of reality.8

The story ends upon an unresolved silence. It shows the elderly Juliet looking at the stubborn refusal of her younger self to respond to her mother’s words of love: “Soon. Soon I’ll see Juliet” (125).9 In a sense, it recalls the young Juliet as someone impatient with the sense of time, someone who yearns for the perfection of a full “now,” unable to defer, to wait for the fulfilment of her longings. The story ends with the retrospective evocation of young Juliet’s impatience conveyed through eloquent body language: “Just to say yes. To Sara it would have meant so much – to her, surely so little. But she had turned away, she had carried the tray to the kitchen, and there she washed and dried the cups and also the glass that had held grape soda. She had put everything away” (125).10

“She had put everything away” is the last sentence of the story and has the finality and inexorability of what cannot be undone. It is an ending without resonance and without space for re-arrangement. On the contrary,

8 This is beautifully evoked in the photograph of Steven Roach which accompanies the original publication of the stories in The New Yorker (June 14 & 21, 2004), 143.
9 Emphasis in the text.
10 Emphasis in the text.
it confirms the initial vision with the virulence of resentment and with the
cold silence of the character's retrospective lucidity. Thus a circle is drawn
linking the younger and the older Juliet, the fusional vision of the first
meeting with its nemesis, in a movement that recalls the composition of
Chagall's painting: “I and the Village” with which the story begins:

Two profiles face each other. One the profile of a pure white heifer, with a particularly
mild and tender expression, the other that of a green-faced man who is neither young
nor old. He seems to be a minor official – maybe a postman – he wears that sort of cap.
His lips are pale, the whites of his eyes shining. A hand that is probably his offers up,
from the lower margin of the painting, a little tree or an exuberant branch, fruited with
jewels.
At the upper margin of the painting are dark clouds, and underneath them some small
tottery houses and a toy church with its toy cross, perched on the curved surface of the
earth. Within this curve a small man (drawn to a larger scale, however, than the
buildings) walks along purposefully with a scythe on his shoulder, and a woman,
drawn to the same scale, seems to wait for him. But she is hanging upside down.
There are other things as well. For instance, a girl milking a cow, within the heifer's
cheek.
Juliet decided at once to buy this print for her parents' Christmas present.
“Because it reminds me of them”....
She looked at the title. I and the Village.
It made exquisite sense. (88)

Many elements of the description match analogous elements in the
story, and an allegorical reading of one in terms of the other is tempting:
Sara, as the woman hanging upside down, Irene as the girl milking the cow,
Sam as the man drawn to a larger scale, the toy church with the toy cross
pointing to the minister, etc.

But the pretentions of these analogies are mocked by the irony inherent
in the rhetorical device of ekphrasis: indeed, the description is not of a
painting of Chagall but of a print in a gift shop, seen through the eyes of
the main character. These informations are only provided to the reader after
he has been led to look directly at something which, as it now turns out, is
mediated through a fictional character. The device emphasizes the nature of
fictionality and suggests that, in the process of interpretation, new elements
force one to readjust one's vision.
The difficulty of perception is thus presented at the outset of the narrative and reflected in a literal way in the formal elements of the description, where the difficulty in describing what is seen is signalled by words denoting aproximation, insecurity or ambiguity: “neither,” “seems to be,” “maybe,” “that sort of cap,” “probably,” “a little tree or an exuberant branch.” There may even be an error in defining the animal: in Munro’s story it is identified as a “a pure white heifer” while in other texts, i.e. a book on Chagall, it is called a a sheep (Walter 20).

The specificity of visual and verbal representation is here commented upon, for indeed, how does one paint concepts like “maybe” and “or” or “that sort of cap?” The totality and immediacy of pictural composition is thus confronted with the need that language has of time. Speaking and writing unfold over time and space and resist the fusion of disperse elements possible in a panoramic view. The composition in juxtaposed fragments of Munro’s story may thus be seen as the graphic expression of the impossibility to reunite the new elements into a satisfying whole. It is also a comment on the difficulty that the character has in linking the myriad frustrations of her experiences at home and to rearrange them in a satisfactory structure.

However, many ironies resist a complete analogy between Munro’s story and the obvious resemblances with modernistic art, say The Waste Land of T. S. Eliot, a poet to whom Munro has been compared as has already been mentioned. The most important of these ironies is the selfconsciousness of the narrator in showing that the aesthetics of vision is in the text, created through language. The real issue therefore seems to be not the opposition between visual and verbal representation, but rather between all forms of artistic representations and truth.

In the story, the relationship between art and truth is presented as the relationship between art and kitsch. As already said, the picture of Chagall that both character and reader delight in is not a work of art, but a print in a giftshop, a piece of kitsch. By definition, kitsch means the imitation of works of art to be used as a commodity to display wealth, or good taste, or intellectual snobbery (Kulka 19). The use of reproductions of works of art is explicitly explored in the story. Thus and at home with her parents, Juliet discovers that the print of Chagall that she has bought for them is stored in the attic next to an “authentic” piece of kitsch: “a comic amateur painting of
the ‘Empress of Ireland’ (97), a ship that sunk on the coast of Canada in 1914. It turns out that Sam has taken the Chagall down in order not to make Irene feel uncomfortable. He does not want to show superiority to an uneducated girl. However, there is a copy of Boticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” hanging in the living room, a proof – according to one of Juliet’s misreadings – that her parents are different and artistic (once again art and kitsch are confounded), and the naked figure of Venus does not seem to be as menacing as the Chagall is. Indeed, in Juliet’s home town, prejudice against intellectual achievement is strong (hence Juliet’s need to display her love child to play down her academic achievements) and displaying modern taste is considered worse than showing leniency towards sexuality.

In a way, “Soon” is a story that suggests that Juliet must travel away from kitsch into art through a process of unlearning the facile gratification of decorative imitations. For indeed, kitsch has been called “the art of happiness” (Moles). Making no claim on truth, indeed depending for its very existence on the decorative and sentimental value of non-authenticity and imitation, kitsch is never challenging, and thus not threatening. This may be a possible interpretation for the flippant observation in the text of a so-called quotation of Picasso: “Chagall is for shopgirls.” The words occur in the gift shop, in a conversation between Juliet and her friend Christa:

“Chagall. I like Chagall,” said Christa. “Picasso was a bastard.”

Juliet was so happy with what she had found that she could hardly pay attention.

“You know what he is supposed to have said? Chagall is for shopgirls,” Christa told her. So what’s wrong with shopgirls? Chagall should have said, Picasso is for people with funny faces.” (88)

Taking the quotation at its word, it could be said to mean that Chagall’s art is “easy” in the sense that it represents images of fusion in accordance with the romantic dreams of shopgirls who long for erotic bliss in never-ending marriages full of babies. As such, the quotations can be

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11 I was unable to found out if this quotation belongs to Picasso. I did find the following commentary by Picasso: “When Chagall paints, one does not know if he is sleeping or dreaming. He must have an angel somewhere in his head” (Walther 73).
seen as a serious comment on the composition of Chagall’s painting where all disparate elements are fused together in one unifying whole. For indeed, if one looks at the composition of “I and the village,” what strikes us is the circular composition where all disparate elements cohere in a unifying vision of form and colour. A critic speaks of the painting in the following terms:

*The simultaneity of motives and the transparency of the forms, two basic elements of cubism, prove his aptitude to ascend to the representation of remembered images, visions and fragments belonging to different realities in one picture. The head of the sheep, the contours of which frame the figure of a woman milking a cow; the houses and the people upside down, proportions that defy all real experience: these elements, ordered in the picture through association, express a reality which transcends the visible world, they represent an imagined universe in which remembrances become symbols.* (Walther 20)

As a picture that represents an “imagined” universe in which remembrances become symbols, the print of Chagall works for Juliet as a “transitional object”12 into which she can pour the beauty of the dream of her parents. For, indeed, Juliet’s projection is a memory, a visual construct of fleeting thoughts and feelings and other elements which she re-discovers rather than discovers in Chagall. There is a truth in this vision, the truth of a happiness which the character has known and still possesses, and of which her pregnancy and later the baby Penelope will be the constant reminder.

In other words, whereas the dissonant realities in Munro’s story challenge the perfection of circularity with the angular sharpness of a pain that cannot be dissolved into a homogeneous picture – with an aesthetics reminiscent of Picasso? – the reality of the small child attests to a truth which constantly escapes the forms that try to arrest it in time, be it Chagall’s, Picasso’s or Munro’s. In Munro’s upside down Platonism, art aspires to life, never to achieve it. For however complex and truthful the art, life will always upset and overflow the forms that try to capture it in framed aesthetic objects. For indeed, what is wrong with shopgirls?

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12 The term was coined by R. Winnicott, in *Playing and Reality*, London: Routledge, 1971.
Bibliography


