TEMPORALITIES OF MODERNISM

edited by
Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, Petronia Petrar

EUROPEAN MODERNISM STUDIES / 9

Coordinamento di Massimiliano Tortora e Annalisa Volpone

Comitato Scientifico

Valentino Baldi (Stranieri di Siena)
Federico Bertoni (Bologna)
Anne-Marie Di Biasio (Institut Catholique de Paris)
Pierluigi Pellini (Siena)
Valeria Tocco (Pisa)

Centre for European
Modernism Studies

Collana del Centre for European Modernism Studies

edited by
Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, Petronia Petrar

Temporalities
of Modernism

Catalogue and reprints information: www.ledizioni.it

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTRIBUTORS

Louis Armand is the author of more than a dozen poetry collections—including, most recently, *Vitus* (2022), *Descartes' Dog* (2021), and *Monument* (with John Kinsella, 2020)—and eight novels, including *The Garden* (2020), *Glasshouse* (2018), and *The Combinations* (2016). His critical works include *Videology* (2015), *The Organ-Grinder's Monkey: Culture after the Avantgarde* (2013), *Event States* (2007), and *Literate Technologies* (2006). In 2009 he received honourable mention for original screenplay at the 2009 Trieste International Film Festival. He is formerly an editor of the international arts journal *VLAK*. www.louis-armand.com

Carmen Borbély is Associate Professor of English Literature at the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj. She teaches eighteenth- and twentieth-century literature and has published studies on modernist poetry, Gothic fiction, memory studies and posthumanism. She has conducted research at John F. Kennedy Institute Berlin, Notre Dame University and, as a Chevening Scholar, at the University of Oxford. In 2015 she was awarded the Prize of the Romanian Association of General and Comparative Literature for her book entitled *Enlightened Forgetting. Tropes of Memory and Oblivion in Eighteenth-Century British Fiction* (2014). She serves as executive editor of *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia* and is an editor of *Caietele Echinox*. She is affiliated with the Centre for the Study of the Modern Anglophone Novel (CSMAN), the Centre for European Modernism Studies (CEMS), and the Phantasma Centre for Imagination Research (Cluj).

Corin Braga is Professor of Comparative Literature at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania. He is the director of Phantasma, the Centre for Imagination Studies (phantasma.lett.ubbcluj.ro), of the academic journal *Caietele Echinox*, and of the book series *Mundus Imaginalis* (Dacia, Cluj) and *Phantasma* (Tracus Arte, Bucharest). He is a Correspondent Member of the Academia de Ciencias de Buenos Aires, a Member of the Academia Europeae, Vice Chair of the Romanian Association of General and Comparative Literature and Vice Chair of the Centre de Recherches Internationales sur l'Imaginaire (CRI2i). He has published numerous volumes of literary studies, including *Le Paradis interdit au Moyen Âge. 1. La quête manquée de l'Eden oriental* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); *La quête manquée de l'Avalon occidentale. Le Paradis interdit au Moyen Age – 2* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006); *Du paradis perdu à l'antiutopie aux XVIe -XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010); *Les antiutopies classiques* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012); *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique* (Classiques Garnier, 2018); *Archétypologie postmoderne* (Paris, Honoré Champion, 2019).

Mimmo Cangiano is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He has been Lauro De Bosis Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University, Visiting Professor at Colgate University, and Assistant Professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His main areas of expertise are European modernisms, far right-wing cultures, Marxism. He published four volumes: *L'Uno e il molteplice nel giovane Palazzeschi* (Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2011); *La nascita del modernismo italiano. Filosofie della crisi, storia e letteratura* (1903-1922) (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018, finalist for the Edinburgh Gadda Prize); *The Wreckage of Philosophy. Carlo Michelstaedter and*

the Limits of Bourgeois Thought (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); *Cultura di destra e società di massa (1880-1939)* (Nottetempo, 2022).

Sanda Cordoș is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Letters of Babeș-Bolyai University, where she teaches Romanian literature. She is the author of the following books: *Literatura între revoluţie şi reacţiune. Problema crizei în literatura română şi rusă a secolului XX* ['Literature between Revolution and Reaction. The Crisis Issue in 20th-Century Russian and Romanian Literature'], 1999 (2nd, revised ed. 2002); the monograph *Alexandru Ivasiuc, 2001; În lumea nouă* ['In the New World'], 2003; *Ce rost are să mai citim literatură?* ['Why Keep on Reading Literature?'], 2004; *Lumi din cuvinte* ['Worlds of Words'], 2012; *Ion Vinea: un scriitor între lumi şi istorii* ['Ion Vinea: A Writer between Worlds and Histories'] (2nd, revised ed. 2017). She has edited the volumes *Spiritul critic la Cercul Literar de la Sibiu* ['The Critical Spirit of the Sibiu Literary Circle'] (2009); *Spiritul critic la Liviu Petrescu* ['The Critical Spirit of Liviu Petrescu'] (2011) and *Ion Pop – 70* (2011), and she has co-edited (with Norman Manea) the volume *Romanian Writers on Writing* (2011). Her studies have appeared in several journals and collective volumes published in the country and abroad.

Erika Mihálycsa is Associate Professor at the Department of English at Babeș-Bolyai University Cluj, where she teaches modern and contemporary British and Irish literature. Her recent publications include *"A wretchedness to defend": Reading Beckett's Letters* (2022) and the co-edited volume *Retranslating Joyce for the 21st Century* (Brill, 2020). Her articles and reviews on Joyce's and Beckett's language poetics, Joyce in translation, Beckett and the visual arts, various aspects

of Anglophone and European literary and visual modernism have appeared in *Word and Image, Joyce Studies Annual, European Joyce Studies, James Joyce Quarterly*. She edited Rareș Moldovan's new Romanian translation of Joyce's *Ulysses* (2022) and has translated fiction by Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Patrick McCabe and others into Hungarian, and a handful of modern and contemporary Hungarian authors into English. She co-edits the literary and arts journal *HYPERION: On the Future of Aesthetics* (New York: Contra Mundum), and serves as one of the editors of *European Joyce Studies* (Brill).

Ilaria Natali is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Florence. Her research interests include modern manuscript studies, intertextuality, and the relationships between literature and the history of ideas, with particular focus on the Enlightenment and Modernist literature. She has published extensively on James Joyce's works; her latest book is *Reading the Inferno: James Joyce's* Notazioni *on Dante's* Divine Comedy (Bulzoni, 2020).

Petronia Petrar is a lecturer with the English Department of the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Her research interests include twentieth century and contemporary fiction, the Scottish novel, and narrative ethics. She has published papers on the modernist, postmodernist and the contemporary novel, and she has edited several collections of essays, including a special issue of the journal *American, British and Canadian Studies* on "World and Nation: Tropes of Representation in Contemporary Scottish Writing." She is the director of the Centre for the Study of the Modern Anglophone Novel, affiliated with her home university. She is the author of *Spatial Representations in Contemporary British Fiction* (2012), and, with Carmen-Veronica Borbély, of

Our Heteromorphic Future: Encoding the Posthuman in Contemporary British Fiction (2014).

Aura Poenar is a postdoctoral researcher in aesthetics and the history of art. She has received a doctorate in comparative literature at the Faculty of Letters, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania. Her particular fields of research include contemporary art, aesthetics, theory, visual arts, theatre, cinema, photography, performance arts.

Jean-Michel Rabaté, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, one of the editors of the *Journal of Modern Literature* and founders of Slought Foundation, is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has authored or edited more than fifty books on modernism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and literary theory. He has taught at Princeton, in Seoul, Shanghai, Wuhan, Manchester, Montréal, Paris and Dijon. Recent books include *Beckett and Sade* (2020), *Rire au Soleil: Lacan, les affects et la littérature* (2019), *Rires Prodigues: Rire et jouissance chez Marx, Freud et Kafka* (2021), *James Joyce, Hérétique et Prodigue* (2022), and *Lacan l'irritant* (forthcoming January 2023), as well as the edited volumes *After Derrida* (2018), *New Beckett* (2019), *Understanding Derrida / Understanding Modernism* (2019), *Knots: Post-Lacanian Readings of literature and film* (2020), *Historical Modernisms* (2022, co-edited with Angeliki Spiropolou) and *Encounters with Soun-Gui Kim: Writings 1975-2021* (2022, co-edited with Aaron Levy).

Angelika Reichmann, Professor of English Literature at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, is the author of *Desire – Identity – Narrative: Dostoevsky's Devils in English Modernism* (2012) and has published widely on English and Russian modernist rewrites of Dostoevsky's classic novel—on Andrey Bely, Joseph Conrad, Aldous

Huxley and John Cowper Powys, among others. Her most recent articles focus on J.M. Coetzee and Dostoevsky. Her chief academic interests also include Welsh literature in English, adaptation theory, psychoanalytic criticism and the female Gothic. She is a member of the Translation Studies Research Group at Eszterházy University and co-editor of the *Eger Journal of English Studies*, as well as the volume on the Victorian and Modernist periods in the Hungarian series of English literary history forthcoming in 2022.

Gábor Schein is a poet, novelist, playwright and critic, Professor at the Institute for Hungarian Literature and Cultural Studies of Eötvös Lóránd University, Budapest. A winner of many prestigious literary awards, he has published five novels, ten collections of poetry, several plays and an opera libretto; several of his novels and volumes of poetry have been translated into English, German, Spanish, French, Bulgarian and Slovenian. His recent academic publications include the co-edited volume *Péter Nádas' Parallelgeschichten* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2020) and the monograph *Füst Milán* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2017). His critical and political essays have appeared in the Hungarian liberal press and in major international papers. The following of his novels have been translated into English: *The Book of Mordechai and Lazarus* (Seagull, 2017), *Autobiographies of an Angel* (Yale University Press, 2022).

Verita Sriratana is Associate Professor at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. A former Visiting Research Fellow in Human Rights at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI) in Lund, Verita also researches in Gender, Necropolitics, Epistemic Violence and Postcolonial Studies. Her publications include an article

entitled "'...and Miraculously Post-Modern Became Ost-Modern': How On or About 1910 and 1924 Karel Čapek Helped to Add and Strike off the 'P'", published in *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: European and Regional Studies* in 2019, and the article "The Land of Smiles, Nazi Chic and Communist Cool: Personality Cult and 'Democide & Holocaust Indifference' in Thailand", published in 2022 as part of the "Identifying and Countering Holocaust Distortion: Lessons for and from Southeast Asia" project supported by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and Heinrich Böll Stiftung Cambodia (https://online.fliphtml5.com/zfgnm/rbue/#p=84).

Randall Stevenson is Emeritus Professor of Twentieth-Century Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He is general editor of Edinburgh University Press's *History of Twentieth-Century Literature in Britain* series, also editing—with Greg Walker—the forthcoming *Oxford Companion to Scottish Theatre. Recent publications include the Oxford English Literary History*, vol.12, *The Last of England?* (Oxford University Press, 2004), *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006, edited with Brian McHale), *Literature and the Great War* (OUP, 2013), and *Reading the Times: Temporality and History in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (EUP, 2018). He has lectured in Australia, Nigeria, Egypt, and Korea, as well as a dozen European countries, including, extensively, Romania in the early 1990s, and occasionally since.

Chloé Thomas is Assistant Professor at the University of Angers, where she teaches English literature and translation. She has published two books on Modernism: *Gertrude Stein. Une expérience américaine* (Le Bord de l'eau, 2019), and *Les Excentrés. Poètes modernistes américains* (CNRS éditions, 2021). She also translated Stein's

Narration conferences into French. Her current research project is about "bad" poetry.

David Vichnar is senior lecturer at the DALC at Charles University Prague. He is also active as an editor, publisher and translator. His publications include *Joyce Against Theory* (2010), *Subtexts* (2015), and *The Avant-Postman* (forthcoming 2023). His edited publications include *Hypermedia Joyce* (2010), *Thresholds* (2011), *Praharfeast* (2012) and *Terrain* (2014). His book-length translations include Philippe Sollers' *H* (French-to-English) and Melchior Vischer's *Second through Brain* (German-to-English), as well as Louis Armand's *Snídaně o půlnoci* (English-Czech). He directs Prague Microfestival and manages Equus Press.

Annalisa Volpone is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Perugia. Her fields of research include modernism, postmodernism, romantic poetry and the interconnections between literature and science. She co-directs with Massimiliano Tortora the CEMS (Centre for European Modernism Studies) and is general editor of the peer-reviewed CEMS book series. She is the author of *Speak of us of Emailia. Per una lettura ipertestuale di Finnegans Wake, Joyce Give & Take*, as well as co-editor with Massimiliano Tortora of the volumes *Borders of Modernism* (2018), *Il romanzo modernista* (2018), *La funzione Joyce nel romanzo italiano* (2022) and *La funzione Joyce nel romanzo occidentale* (2022). Her articles and reviews have appeared in *European Joyce Studies, Joyce Studies in Italy, James Joyce Literary Supplement*; she has contributed book chapters to edited collections on Joyce. In 2020 she was awarded an RM-MLA Research Fellowship at the Huntington Library in San Marino (CA).

Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, Petronia Petrar

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), a novel written at a watershed moment in history, has one of the protagonists re-emerge into daily consciousness with the intuition of the aporias of her temporal condition, which involves both inescapable embeddedness and irredeemable alienation:

> But it was summer now. She had been waked by the birds. How they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake. Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favourite reading—*An Outline of History*—and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.[1]

Much of what fascinated the modernists about the new experience of temporality is encapsulated in this early paragraph of a text that is, in Paul Ricoeur's terms, eminently "about time."[2] Lucy Swithin's involuntary plunge into

---

1   Virginia Woolf. *Between the Acts* (London: Vintage, 2005), 4.
2   Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (1984; Chicago: The

quotidian awareness is performed sensorially and bodi-
ly ("[f]orced to listen, she had stretched") and extended
intellectually (via metaphorical and literal "attacks"), to
the deepest recesses of natural history. Her slight discom-
fort mimics the pervading unease felt by Woolf's prede-
cessors—and relentlessly embraced by her Darwinist fa-
ther—at the geological and astronomical temporal scales
popularised by science during the second half of the 19th
century. Against the vast expanse of the world's time, the
flickering instant, so precious to modernist artists, is both
a violent interruption and a refuge. For Mrs. Swithin, such
an instant concentrates the abrupt singularity of the "now,"
but it also bears the traces of everyday repeatability and of
seasonal cyclicity. For Woolf's readers and for her narra-
tor, who self-reflexively insists on the distinction between
"actual time" and "mind time," Mrs. Swithin's protract-
ed moment mirrors the spell spent "between the acts," the
intermission represented by the village pageant staged by
the novel's characters, as well as by the text itself. Just as
the text asserts fiction's break from history and its suspen-
sion of "actual time," it faces the inevitability of historical
violence, to which it counterpoises an ethical vision of a
sort of *discontinuous continuity* with the world and with
one another. Diffidently, Reverend Streatfield declares at
the end of Miss La Trobe's play: "To me at least it was
indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part
of the whole. Yes, that occurred to me, sitting among you
in the audience. […] Scraps, orts and fragments! Surely,
we should unite?"[3]

Our formulation of a "discontinuous continuity" hopes
to accomplish more than performing the insolvability of
modernist oxymoronic figuration. Rather, it hopes to sug-
gest that Woolf's response to the calamitous personal and

University of Chicago Press, 1985), 101.
   3   Ibid., 115.

historical circumstances of the composition and publication of *Between the Acts* is derived from her sense of antinomic time, which allows for an ethical insertion in an impermanent community that encompasses, but also transcends, the strictly human. As Lucy Swithin's sleep is interrupted by the song of the birds (generally agreed upon to allude to the imminence of aerial war in Woolf's writing), she also embraces her kinship with "the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon," pointing at our simultaneous belonging to, and estrangement from, the temporal flux. Time is dissolution and catastrophe but, as Thomas M. Allen reminds us in the introduction to a remarkable recent critical collection, it hosts and makes possible the richness of being and it "binds us to others in intimacy."[4] In *Between the Acts*, erosion becomes the condition and the trace of continuity as change—geological, archaeological, biological, and historical. On the very first page, Mr. Oliver, the patriarch, formerly "of the Indian civil service," makes the persistence within erosion visible by describing an airborne perspective that unveils "the scars" left by the Britons, the Romans, the Elizabethans, and by the agricultural practices catalysed by the Napoleonic wars.[5] On the other hand, Woolf's text explodes conventional notions of linearity, of beginnings and endings when on the final page it returns to "the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks."[6] It had done, so, of course, throughout the length of a narrative situated "between the acts," along swift passages oriented in no particular direction, prone to "increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future,"[7] in the manner of

---

4   Thomas M. Allen, "Introduction" to *Time and Literature*, edited by Thomas M. Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-16: 1.

5   Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1.

6   Ibid., 131.

7   Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 4.

Lucy Swithin. Such passages also continuously reverse the relationship between fiction and time and the conventional priority of the latter over the former. Do the catastrophic events of "real time" contain the brief interlude of the village pageant, or does the curtain rising in the last paragraph signal the dependence of our sense of time on fictional representation? Is experience—especially temporal experience—distinguishable from narrative?

These are the sorts of explicit or implicit questions raised by virtually all modernist novels, as well as by their reverberations into the late 20th or even the 21st centuries. As Ronald Schleifer has argued, modernist temporality is founded on a "logic of abundance," materialised in the assortments and constellations of public and private experience suddenly made available by science, technology, economics and socio-cultural history. Rather than the empty, universal and abstract container theorised by Newtonian science, time modelled itself on the irregular structures of memory and the unconscious (haunted by the threat of technological reproduction and automatized disruption), to become "a constituent element of explanation and experience."[8] Accordingly, several key terms that can shed light on our own relation to the contemporary world are rooted in the turbulence of the modernist age: relativity, originality, reproducibility, irreversibility, (in)terminability, duration, fragmentation, contingency, necessity, (anti)messianism, revolution, and (perhaps above all), the threat of a future whose apocalyptic imminence becomes more and more clear. That the essays included in the present volume are able to address them all and more, from a transnational and multilingual perspective, testifies to the increased relevance of modernist-inspired perceptions of time in the current geopolitical context.

---

8   Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Time. The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

According to Martin Hägglund, modernist writing is characterised by a "chronolibidinal condition," or the longing to live within time, to preserve the abundance of temporal experience, rather than aspire to the immobility of eternity. It is the "investment in a life that can be lost," generating the double bind of "chronophilia" (desire for time) and "chronophobia" (fear of time's passing) that accounts, for Hägglund, for the attempt to capture, through complex strategies of narrative experimentation, a present that is already gone even before it has fully occurred.[9] Tim Armstrong's succinct survey of the "series of crises in the understanding of time,"[10] comprising both "automaticised" or collective forms of temporality and the freedom of individual memory or sensorial multiplicity, serves as a useful reminder of the range and depth of temporal engagements available starting with the late 19th century. Caught between an archival impulse that runs the risk of freezing the authenticity of the moment within the constraints of abstract scientism or logocentrism, and an exuberant forward motion threatening to fall back on notions of linear progress, modernist writing has no choice but to question its own foundations and, in the process, to foreground the circular movement that provides legitimation both to its project, and to our representation of time.

Following Henri Lefebvre, Adam Barrows attempts to reinstate the co-conditionality of space and time by defining modernity as "the narrative of a necessarily provisional and uneasy harmonization of a host of arrhythmic temporalities which, although produced by particular spaces,

_____

9   Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2012), 9-10.

10   Tim Armstrong, "Modernist Temporality: The Science and Philosophy and Aesthetics of Temporality from 1880," in *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, edited by Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 31-46: 32.

threaten always to reshape and remake them."[11] Rather than the spatialisation of time preached by the proponents on the "spatial turn" in social sciences and the humanities, modernity brings together contradictory and antinomic senses of time ranging in scale from the microscopic to the cosmic, from the corporeal to the geometric, from the local to the planetary, and from the geological to the virtual. The modernist "panarchies" lying at the heart of Barrow's notion of the "chronometric imaginary"—described as mutually embedded, non-hierarchical, ever-flowing rhythms of adaptive change[12]—may furnish us with an apt model for conceptualising the cataclysmic streams of the past-present-future continuum now threatening us with extinction. Their heterotopic rootedness finds a correspondence in the diversity of interests exhibited by the present volume, which ranges over a multiplicity of versions of modernisms and their prolongations into our present, while the capacity to mediate between utopian optimism and a generalised sense of catastrophe may give us hope for memorious persistence into the future.

The volume opens with Jean-Michel Rabaté's examination of emblematic unfinished modernist works. Rabaté's essay investigates the possibility that artistic and literary modernism, emerging inside the project of modernity that has been pronounced incomplete by Jürgen Habermas, is also inherently interminable, on aesthetic and philosophical grounds immanent to the works in question. Through the intellective and aesthetic crises embodied by these works, Rabaté examines the shattering of teleologies, the progressive questioning of language and of form, which render virtually the entire radical side of modernism—the variety favoured by Adorno—a project that resists

---

11   Adam Barrows, *Time, Literature, and Cartography After the Spatial Turn. The Chronometric Imaginary* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

12   Ibid., 60.

completion, born as it is out of the very impossibility of utterance. Drawing on Freud's and Sándor Ferenczi's essays theorising analysis, and the ensuing therapy, as a process that never comes to an end unless it reaches exhaustion, Rabaté proposes an analogous interminability as the temporal framework of modernism. According to his argument, Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aaron*, singled out by Adorno as epitomising the modernist aesthetic, is necessarily interminable, since its relentless self-questioning precludes the very possibility of a totalising form and of expressing a metaphysical absolute. Surveying a series of incomplete and interminable modernist works from Mallarmé to Beckett, the essay sets up distinct categories of radical interminable modernism. The first of these is exemplified by an unfinished artwork by Duchamp, whose engagement with time takes the form of co-opting accident and finitude as co-creators; a second category, into which Eliot's Prufrock poems fall, can be inscribed into a Derridean structure of deferral; while a third category, illustrated by Benjamin's *Arcades* project, is of the forever incomplete and incompletable, yet continuously rearranged collection. In the next essay, Randall Stevenson significantly nuances and problematises dominant narratives about the Bergson-inspired treatment of time as a continuum in modernist fiction. Starting from autobiographical reflections of Virginia Woolf and continuing with examples from works by Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, or Edward Thomas, Stevenson shows how the new-fangled modern experience of speed, of travelling by motorcar or train, as well as early cinema, resulted less in a corroboration of the philosophy of consciousness as a flow or sheer duration than in an awareness of the fragmentation into discrete units of visual experience, of affect and memory, and of the resulting sense of selfhood.

The next section of the volume addresses chronological discrepancies, blind spots of literary and cultural history,

and shows the—at times ominous—historical contingency of adversary modernist and avant-garde works. Mimmo Cangiano surveys the pre-WWI Italian modernist artistic and intellectual scene, drawing attention to a conceptual fallacy: namely, that the interpretive framework of modernism that gained ground in academia is itself part of modernism, thus it tends to freeze the multiprismatic and often contradictory tendencies of modernism in a closed circuit of interpretation. One of the modernist philosophical positions to reject universalistic thought and, with it, some of the underlying assumptions of European modernism, was the early 20th-century Italian "philosophy of contingency," of Nietzschean and vitalist inspiration, which came to deliver a powerful ideological tool to nationalism. Cangiani's archeology of the concept and term of modernism in Italy saliently uncovers the role of these contestatory philosophical and literary positions in the genesis of an anti-essentialist early 20th-century Italian nationalism, built on anti-Hegelian grounds and prioritising a contingent "becoming" to a predetermined Being in its projections of a collective identity. Another significant correction of received narratives and chronologies of modernism is brought by Louis Armand and David Vichnar's archival research of an understudied chapter in the history of Dada: the richly multi-directional and rambunctious activities of its Prague and Bohemian practitioners, encompassing literature, theatre, the visual arts and performance, and responding to a complicated cultural-political context of divided, Czech and German, allegiances. As the authors show, the loosely connected group's spoofing anti-authoritarian Dada gestures spilt over the (post)imperial cultural-political context and nettled even the figureheads of international Dada. The protagonist of these findings may well be Melchior Vischer, the author of the sole known Dada novel (however self-defeating that definition may be), but the other revelations brought by the essay

are no less noteworthy, including the marginal involve-
ment in Prague Dada of a polytropic Jaroslav Hašek. If the
Prague scene reacted to the trauma of WWI, the Russian
revolution, the dissolution of the empire and the birth of
the modern nation with a contestation of all sources of
authority, such avant-garde shock tactics are sometimes
engulfed by the nightmare of history, as Verita Sriratana
shows in her case study of the Polish writer and provoca-
teur Bruno Jasieński. As Sriratana shows, Jasieński's dis-
enchanted novel *I Burn Paris*, drawing on the events of
the Paris Commune, provides an uncomfortable example
of avant-garde socialist, Marxist utopia and at the same
time turns that utopia inside out. The fate of the book and
its author is a cautionary tale of the consequences of ide-
ological appropriations, as well as an ironic (and tragic)
triumph of avant-garde subversion that resists domestica-
tion across time. Jasieński, a political refugee in the USSR
after his deportation from France on account of his novel,
falls victim to the Great Purge and is posthumously sym-
bolically disowned by prominent literary circles in his na-
tive Poland.

   The essays included in the volume's mid-section re-en-
vision the ways in which the subjective time-keeping
practices of British, Irish, American, and Romanian (post)
modernist writers run counter to chronometry's hegemon-
ic and stultifying regularity. In her densely textured read-
ing of several Woolfian narratives that tap into the tangled
temporalities of mirrors, Ilaria Natali re-visits Umberto
Eco's thoughts on the potential of specular reflections to
provide a conduit to self-consciousness and discloses,
in the modernist writer's short stories and novels, a per-
sistent concern with the polyvalent timeframes in which
self-recognition or misrecognition may occur. Heeding the
unclosable gap between referent and image, Natali notes
that the looking-glasses, watery surfaces, and other reflect-
ing devices featured in short stories like "The Lady in the

Looking-glass," "The New Dress" and "The Fascination of the Pool" set into motion complex reframings of time outside simple flux-stasis dichotomies. Exploring Woolf's engagement with and departure from several versions of the Narcissus myth, the essay pays particular attention to mirroring as, on the one hand, the search for an indivisible identity, cotemporal and coterminous with itself, and, on the other hand, as an act of diffracting identity into a mis-remembered or mis-anticipated self. Seen as visual analogues for the perceived insufficiency of language to capture the real, mirrors—Natali deftly argues with reference to novels like *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*—enclose polychronic aggregates of personal and impersonal, or of permanent and transient time, beckoning to the possibility of unhinging the iconic representation of the singular self into a semiotic construal of its multiple and interconnected othernesses. In the next essay, which charts the actualisation of Woolf's and Joyce's time-telling approaches in Sylvia Plath's diaristic and fictional writings, Annalisa Volpone meticulously validates the idea that modernism's manifold temporalities have not exhausted their capacity to spur restitutions and refigurations of interior duration. Interrogating the convergences and dispersals of Joycean or Woolfian chronographies in a text that draws its sap from, and also profoundly disputes, autobiography's generic temporal scaffolding, Plath syncs—according to this illuminating foray into the intercommunicating aesthetics of this triad of writers—the (meta)fictional rhythms of *The Bell Jar* with those of her modernist precursors' interiorised landscapes. Enlacing numerous associative threads between this novel and a rich array of textual antecedents, which range from *The Waves* and its instances of pulsating poeticity, to Joyce's kaleidoscopic refashioning of semantics in *Finnegans Wake*, Volpone's essay discloses, one by one, the numerous isochronies that adjoin the mindscape of Plath's protagonist to the time milieus

of modernist subjectivities. The inquiry into avenues for synchronising modernist views on (post)chronometric time is carried through into the third and final essay of this section, in which Corin Braga's comprehensive overview captures the dis- and re-articulation of the Romanian psychological novel's chronotope under the impact exerted by William James's philosophy of mind, Henri Bergson's intuitionism and, not least, the convoluted pulse of Proust's prose. Braga retraces the diffusion of the new aesthetic in Romanian narratives whose polymorphous time layers convey disarticulated or derealised states of consciousness, whether brought on by a willed withdrawal into the "immediate unreality" of Max Blecher's oneiric texts, or enforced by the traumatic, disjunctive time of warfare in Liviu Rebreanu's *Forest of the Hanged* (1922) and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's *The Dragon* (1923).

It is a well-worn critical cliché that much of what we call modernism was an answer to the powerful shock delivered by the Great War; consequently, war and revolution as time out of joint, as events that fracture continuity and the faith in a linear temporality of progress feature among the prominent concerns of interwar modernist literature. The subject of Angelika Reichmann's essay is a rare specimen in Anglophone modernism: Welsh poet and painter David Jones's monumental epic poem *In Parenthesis*, an attempt at creating a totalising and encyclopaedic epic form relying on a mythopoeic scaffolding, of spatialising time into a timelessness imbued with sacred overtones, with the purpose of conveying the experience of the traumatic rupture of the war. Reichmann saliently demonstrates how this unique modernist work may constitute a foil to T.S. Eliot's "mythic method," being a text which evokes a timelessness that is inscribed less as a mirroring of (pre)history and an inchoate present than as a presentifying of the trauma of the war as total event. Chloé Thomas brings to attention a surprising connection, Gertrude Stein's interest in,

and growing use of, the occult and prophecy during the
years of WWII. As Thomas argues, this interest was not
kindled, as in the case of many prewar modernists, in a
belief in the occult and irrationality, but rather, in the nar-
rative forms of prophecy and in their projected futurity,
a temporality of deferral. Interwar Romanian fiction, as
Sanda Cordoș shows in her sensitive rehistoricising and
recontextualising analysis, treats prospective revolution as
a potential for disruptive transformation, yet which alone
could end a perceived social-cultural condition of belat-
edness. Reading representative fiction and critical essays
of prominent interwar Romanian writers, both modernists
and traditionalists, with widely different political outlooks,
Cordoș traces a consistent pattern of figuration of the rev-
olution (whether a historical event, a recent peasant up-
rising, or the anticipated socialist revolution) as a pivotal,
exceptional event that could rupture history, inaugurate a
new temporality, as well as set free suppressed, violent and
irrational drives.

The volume closes with two essays that address the
question of the viability of a modernist aesthetic in the
post-Holocaust, post-testimonial age, with the pressure
of the unassimilable event cracking open prewar human-
ism and adding unprecedented weight to the problem of
the unsayable. Modernism studies have long been work-
ing with a concept of post-WWII, ethical late modern-
ism that considerably overlaps with writing degree zero,
yet the radicalism of certain representatives of this par-
adigm—Beckett, Celan, Sebald—continue to challenge
constructions of modernism, however elastic. Gábor
Schein's essay explores cardinal questions raised in the
oeuvre of one such writer, Imre Kertész, which amounts to
an outright "liquidation," to borrow the title of one of his
novels, of the aesthetic of the modernist Künstlerroman.
Kertész's novels originate from the awareness that after
Auschwitz, history itself is rendered a history of rupture

and of catastrophe, and the only tradition to not ward off the ethical and aesthetic implications of this insight would be "the Holocaust as culture." Schein uncovers the interconnected ways in which Kertész's radical texts put dominant humanist-imbued interpretive frameworks on trial, exposing their techniques of both aesthetic and political evasion. Aura Poenar tackles the question of what renders an image disruptive in the post-Holocaust age, and how theories of the ethics of the image have been forcefully revised under conditions of the relentless commercialising of the visual archive of the catastrophe. On a series of case studies encompassing the films of Resnais, Pontecorvo, Benigni or Spielberg, and press photographs documenting traumatic events, Poenar outlines the drowning effect of commercialised images which tend to render invisible the very trauma that they allegedly represent. At the same time, she points to resources of the image that might validate an ethic of resistance, even if such images should defy the negative approach called for in Claude Lanzmann's seminal work.

As we hope the contributions making up the present volume evidence, the kind of discontinuous continuity we identified in Virginia Woolf's writing is apparent at the level of the "chronometric imaginary" across borders. Diverse and divergent as they may seem, the essays share a focus on understanding the way in which time informs narrative, and, reciprocally, narrative shapes our experience of time, as well on exploring the conditions of (late) modernity that seems increasingly to be running out of time. In their "panarchic" reach (to use Adam Barrows's term), such perspectives point to the emergence of the flickering, unstable and fractured sense of community discernible throughout *Between the Acts*, that welcomes interruption, embraces the erratic, but nevertheless strives towards forms of interrelation.

Part I

Modernist Temporalities Between Presentism and Time Interminable

Jean-Michel Rabaté

MODERNISM TERMINABLE AND INTERMINABLE

If we compare the masterpieces that Joyce and Proust published in 1922 with works by von Hofmannsthal and Kafka, works left undone and unfinished, we may wonder how the former managed to complete their big novels in 1922 whereas the latter failed. Why couldn't von Hofmannsthal and Kafka complete works that had been planned in detail? This question rebounds as a question about the "end" of modernism—a topic that has been often discussed but never solved. Can we find a historical date for such an ending; if so, what date? If not, is this end a fiction? If this is a fiction, then modernism might be called "interminable," which would rule out the need to talk its ending, hence about fuzzy concepts that try half-heartedly to be historical such as "postmodernism." However, before proceeding to these exclusionary judgments, it is necessary to distinguish the "interminable" from the "unfinished." Jürgen Habermas famously claimed that modernity, by which he meant above all the Enlightenment, despite its many failings, kept its reserve of positive agency and therefore had to be considered as an "unfinished project" that we should attempt to complete. This might not be the case with modernism, if only for the reason that its very project has not ended, as I will try to argue.

The seeds for my reflection were planted by Shane Weller in Antwerp during a Beckett conference.[1] I had been stating that Beckett, more than any other author, had

---

1   "Beckett and Modernism." Antwerp University, 27-30 April 2016.

changed our concept of modernism, but also suggested that a revised idea of modernism should pay heed to the lessons that we can gather from Adorno, Benjamin, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot. To this I added the name of Franz Kafka; but Weller objected to my mentioning Kafka as a modernist: Kafka, he said, would belong to postmodernism. And if my argument led me to reject that category, it should be called an "after-modernism." I then pointed out that Kafka had died in 1924, a simple fact that made me want to include him in modernism, whether high or low, centralised or minor, local or exotic. Indeed, in her excellent book *Exotic Spaces in German Modernism* Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei[2] has no qualms to include Kafka. In purely historical terms, if we agree to see the peak of "high modernism" in 1922 and then go back forward ten years in each direction, a rather conservative estimate will yield 1912 to 1932 for international modernism, a bracket into which Kafka fits neatly.

Weller was not swayed: for him, such literal dates did not matter for he stressed that Kafka's works had reached their impact later, that they found their full relevance after WWII. For Adorno, as we know, Kafka made sense after Auschwitz, and partly because of Auschwitz. This was a strong point. We know that Edwin and Willa Muir had translated Kafka's main works from 1930 to 1938. My own work on Kafka was influenced by earlier commentators like Albert Camus, Clement Greenberg, and Günther Anders. Anders's superb *Kafka: Pro Und Contra* dates from 1951.[3] These glosses do inscribe Kafka in a later episteme. However, is it possible to say that Kafka only makes sense after the Holocaust? If he may have predicted the rise of bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, if

---

2   Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *Exotic Spaces in German Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3   Günther Anders, *Kafka, pro und contra. Die Prozeß-Unterlagen* (C.H. Beck Verlag, 1951).

he seems to announce the horrors of WWII, did he foresee the slaughter of European Jews, as certain strong readings of the ending *of Der Verschollene* (*Amerika)*, contend?

For me at any rate, if Kafka had died in 1924, his texts could and should first be seen in their initial context. They had to be compared with texts by Max Brod, Kubin, Paul Klee, as I have done in *Kafka L.O.L.,*[4] or placed in the context of theological discussions of the first two decades of the century, as Paul North does in his groundbreaking *The Yield.*[5] In spite of these caveats, Shane Weller had nevertheless reminded me that the concept of modernism would not be historicised so clearly, above all because it follows a Freudian temporal logic, the logic of a retrospective arrangement that seems predicated upon a reversible history. As we all know, modernism as a label was retroactively applied to different works and schools unlike say Dadaism, Futurism or Surrealism, movements that were launched with their own manifestoes, declarations and all sort of inhouse protocols of reading. Modernism was impregnated from the start by Freud's *Nachträglichkeit,* this retrospective reformulation of events that in themselves could not be accessed directly because either of their invisibility or of their traumatic nature. It was this reflexive worry that led me to take a closer look at Freud's essay on "analysis terminable and interminable" and then to wonder whether its insights could be relevant for our conceptions of modernism.

In this 1937 article, Freud considers the achievements of psychoanalysis in a melancholy manner before concluding that it is an "impossible" profession, next to teaching

---

4   Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Kafka L.O.L. Notes on Promethean Laughter* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018).

5   Paul North, *The Yield: Kafka's Atheological Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

and working in politics.[6] Freud, aware of his impending demise, shocked by the rise of Nazism, considers the earlier promises of psychoanalysis: to cure neurotic symptoms so as to allow patients to work, love, and live better. This leads him to ask when a cure can be called "complete." Classical medicine, on the lookout for fast-working medications, is contemptuous of psychoanalysis that takes so long. Even former disciples, like Otto Rank, tried to speed things up. Having moved to the US, Rank saw that American prosperity needed a cure "designed to adapt the tempo of analytic therapy to the haste of American life."[7] Patients were told that a few months sufficed to be cured: all they had to do was to remember their birth trauma. Freud's condemnation is clear: "The theory and practice of Rank's experiment are now things of the past—no less than American 'prosperity' itself."[8]

Freud thus meditates on mistakes he made, as when he tried to bring the "Wolfman's analysis" to completion. Working with Sergei Pankejeff, Freud decided to end the analysis at a given time, which happened to coincide with the outbreak of WWI. At first, the results looked satisfactory. Only later did it become clear that the neurotic and psychotic symptoms had returned. Thus Freud wonders whether one can say that any given therapy reaches its "natural end."[9] External difficulties often prevent the analyst and the analysand from reaching completion. Freud distinguishes an *incomplete* analysis, an *unfinished* one and what might be called an interminable process.[10]

---

6   S. Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," *Standard Edition,* translated by James Strachey and others, vol. XXIII (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 217-253: 248.

7   Ibid., 216.

8   Ibid., 217.

9   Ibid., 219.

10   Ibid., 219.

What is the "end" for a psychoanalysis that is not going to be interminable? The "end" of analysis is not a simple termination but the realisation of an ideal: it means resolving the patient's repressions by filling in the gaps in a confused memory. Freud doubts that this is feasible; there are many cases in which an apparently successful treatment is followed by a backsliding into neurotic behaviour. This happened with Sándor Ferenczi, whom Freud analysed successfully in 1914 and 1916. For a while Rank had a successful personal and professional life but later displayed negative transference before his death in 1933.[11] Some factors explain those difficulties: a constitutional disposition in which the drives are too strong, or the delayed impact of trauma. Like Kant in "On the Common Saying: That May be Correct in Theory, but it is of No Use in Practice," Freud concludes that the solution is not shortening the length of the analysis but adding more theory: "… without metapsychological speculation and theorizing—I had almost said 'phantasying'—we shall not get another step forward."[12]

One reason for Freud's pessimism is that he refuses to share his colleagues' belief that the ego offers a stable foundation, and thus writes: "a normal ego … is, like normality in general, an ideal fiction. The abnormal ego, which is unserviceable for our purposes, is unfortunately no fiction. Every normal person, in fact, is only normal on the average. His ego approximates to that of the psychotic in some part or other and to a greater or lesser extent…"[13] He compares the psychoanalytic work with deciphering a heavily censored text and then calls up the philosopher Empedocles, who taught "that two principles governed events in the life of the universe and in the life of the mind, and that those principles were everlastingly

---

11   Ibid., 221.
12   Ibid., 225.
13   Ibid., 235.

at war with each other. He called them φιλία (love) and νεικος (strife)."[14] *Philia* strives for unity, *Neikos* seeks to undo, separate and divide. Freud underlines that if the incomplete is not the merely unfinished, incompletion as such calls up the spectre of destructiveness, which is not far from the death drive. The death drive lurks behind the sense that a task is not only unfinishable but reveals a desire to destroy.

Freud also quotes Ferenczi's "The Problem of Termination of Analyses" (1928), an essay in which we verify that Ferenczi has a less tragic take on termination; for him, the ending should come of its own, it would happen when a cure "dies of exhaustion."[15] Patients should indulge the cure until they see real satisfactions as closer to hand; and then the analysis is over. Unlike his friend and colleague, Freud chooses to remain in a tragic mode. Empedocles's dualism allows him to revisit the conflict of Eros and Thanatos, which is toned down, it seems as the clash between strife and love. I will try to claim that Freud's insights can help us understand the rationale of unfinished works, and I will adduce first musical examples that can show how and why modernism appears as interminable.

I will compare two famously incomplete musical scores, Franz Schubert's *Eighth Symphony* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron* to ask whether there is a difference between "Romantic incompletion" and "Modernist incompletion." Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in B minor is known as the *Unfinished Symphony* (*Unvollendete*). It was started in 1822 and left with only two movements. Schubert died young indeed in 1828, but he had lived for

---

14   Ibid., 246.

15   Sándor Ferenczi, "The problem of Termination of Analyses," in *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-analysis*, translated by E. Mosbacher (London, Karnac, 1994), 77-86: 85.

another six years, time enough to finish a symphony. We have the first two movements fully written and the first two pages of a scherzo. Schubert began a third movement in B minor, leaving 30 bars of fully orchestrated scherzo and 112 bars in short score.

One possible reason for Schubert's leaving the symphony incomplete is that he used a triple meter throughout. He was breaking a rule, since there was a prohibition against having three consecutive movements in the same meter when this was a symphony. In that sense, the Eighth Symphony may well be the first Romantic symphony: breaking a major rule about its own form, it gives its due to musical lyricism thanks to the steady lyrical pulse that dominates in the sonata form. Musicologists disagree as to why Schubert failed to complete the symphony. Did he stop in the middle of the scherzo in the fall of 1822 because he associated the scherzo with the outbreak of his syphilis? Was he distracted when he composed the *Wanderer Fantasy* for piano, in which he immersed himself soon after? Some scholars have attempted to prove that the Symphony is complete with its truncated two-movement form. In fact, that very abbreviated structure has captivated the public: the Eighth Symphony is one of Schubert's most cherished compositions. I happen to know it well: my daughter, a cellist, had to perform it every year from high school to college. I personally think that the two completed movements can stand alone, and that the ending is magnificent, a veritable musical triumph.

If we jump one century, we find a parallel occurrence with *Moses und Aron,* Arnold Schoenberg's opera whose third act was left unfinished in 1932. Only two of the three acts were completed. Schoenberg composed a few sketches for Act 3. Despite its unfinished status, it is regarded as Schoenberg's masterpiece, and a perfect exemplification

of modernism in music.[16] Act 2 presents the rebellion of the Hebrews after Moses has gone for forty days. Left in the desert, feeling abandoned, they despair. Aaron allows them to return to pagan images like the Golden Calf. Offerings are brought, a devout youth who protests is killed by tribal leaders, priests sacrifice four willing virgins, the people drink and dance wildly, launching a frantic sexual orgy. Then Moses returns from the mountain. Destroying the golden calf, smashing the tablets of the law, he confronts Aaron. Aaron explains that he kept Moses' idea alive by explaining it "badly." He has allowed images so as not to deprive the people of hope. Moses remains alone, condemning Aaron's falsification of the absolute God.

The third act is reduced to a short libretto that Schoenberg wrote without providing the music. We learn that Moses puts Aaron under arrest; Aaron in chains states that words mean nothing for the people if he is not there to interpret them in a way they can understand. Moses orders the soldiers to release him; he falls dead. Moses pardons him post mortem and concludes that the people will reach their aim—unity with God, or the Promised Land.

As Adorno argued, the fact that Schoenberg never completed an opera that is considered his masterpiece derives from a structural problem. Adorno calls the opera a "fragment" in "Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*."[17] Here is what he writes:

---

16   See Richard Begam's excellent "Schoenberg, Modernism, and Degeneracy" in *Modernism and Opera,* edited by Richard Begam and Matthew Smith Wilson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 206-243.

17   Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*," *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2002), 225-248.

At the end of Act II of the biblical opera, in the final
sentence which has become music, Moses breaks down
and laments "O word, O word which I lack." The insol-
uble contradiction which Schoenberg has taken as his
project and which is attested by the entire tradition of
tragedy, is also the contradiction of the actual work. (…
Schoenberg) must have grasped the fact that its absolute
metaphysical content would prevent it from becoming
an aesthetic totality. [...] Important works of art are the
ones that aim for an extreme; they are destroyed in the
process and their broken outlines survive as the ciphers
of a supreme, unnamable truth. It is in this positive
sense that *Moses und Aron* is a fragment and it would
not be extravagant to attempt to explain why it was left
incomplete by arguing that it could not be completed.
But such an explanation would have little to do with the
notion of the tragic, the insoluble conflict between finite
and infinite inherent in the subject matter Schoenberg
chose. The impossibility which appears intrinsic to
the work is, in reality, an impossibility which was not
intended.[18]

Adorno's remarks are sharp. He refuses an easy solu-
tion that would be to conclude that the problem posed by
the work was insoluble. He sees the impossibility to com-
plete not as an accident but as a historical factor: it has
become impossible to write sacred music of the highest
order while at the same time keeping in mind the idea of a
totality, even if Schoenberg nevertheless believed in some
form of totalising religion. Schoenberg experienced a re-
turn to secularised mysticism, which had led him to redis-
cover his Jewish roots. He composed his opera at the time
of Hitler's rise to power. After Hitler's fall, he was unable
to revisit the score. But Adorno adds that the meaning of

---

18   "Sacred Fragment," 226.

the opera cannot be reduced to biographical or historical data.[19] The issue is the clash between the Absolute and the possibility of the work:

> By conjuring up the Absolute, and hence making it de-
> pendent on the conjurer, Schoenberg ensured that the
> work could not make it real. But it does the Absolute the
> honor of not pretending that it is present, a traditional re-
> ality that cannot be lost, but instead, of defining it as ac-
> cessible only in the work, even if it thereby negates it.[20]

A Jew converted to Protestantism, Schoenberg worked with the Lutheran version of the Bible. All the while, his aim was to recreate his musical language anew. A letter from March 1933[21] offers reasons for the composer's inability to write the music for Act III: the discrepancy between *Numbers* 20:6-13, in which God condemns Moses and Aaron to die before reaching the Promised Land because they struck the rock at Meribah in order to give water to the thirsty Hebrews rather than speak to the rock as God had commanded, and *Exodus* 17:6, in which God commands Moses to strike the rock. Schoenberg felt baffled by a punishment so severe for a trifling offense. In the libretto for Act III, Schoenberg has transferred the crime of striking the rock to Aaron. Moses accuses Aaron of wanting to gain power over the people—such an ambition merits death.

Moses und Aron thus stages a conflict between Moses' inability to convey the idea of an absolute God to his people without images and his belief that no image of God can be made. Facing Moses' failure to represent God in words, Aaron uses the seductive images and is more successful:

---

19   Ibid., 232.
20   Ibid., 227.
21   Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, translated by Wilkins and Kaiser (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 172.

it gives the impetus for the people to leave and reach the Promised Land. Moses's inability to say the Word leads to series of divisions in the opera's tone row. The tone row never reaches a synthesis; it disappears and is replaced by divisions into five notes and seven notes. It is as if the music had jumped over the musical conflict, exhausts itself until it reaches silence.

Moses and Aaron dramatises its unresolved conflict musically and textually. Its lack of musical synthesis, its conflicting partitions that are never united make of *Moses und Aron* an incomplete musical idea—"an idea without a resolution."[22] *Moses und Aron*, struggling between irreconcilable opposites, is emblematic of modernism, at least of the modernism Adorno liked and praised. One could offer a distinction between *terminable unfinished compositions* like Schubert's Eighth Symphony and *interminable unfinished works* like *Moses und Aron*. To make sense of Schubert's lack of completion, we just need to accept that this work is not really a "symphony;" thanks to this generic slippage, it becomes infinite Romantic music, beautiful music that we enjoy fully until the shortened end.

In the interminable project, music itself becomes problematic as a "language" keeping a relation to images. This generates a pathos that Adorno sees as tragic. The tragic pathos that imbues Schoenberg's sacred opera is absent from Schubert's ethereal symphony. The clash between the Absolute idea and its inevitable compromise with images and present-day concerns underpins one of modernism's earliest incomplete masterpieces, Mallarmé's dream of the Book.

In a letter sent by Mallarmé to Verlaine in 1885 he surveys his career and compares his work with attempts by alchemists to achieve the *Grand Oeuvre* of the transmutation

---

22   See Jack Boss's musicological analysis in "Interval Symmetries as Divine Perfection in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron,*" *Konturen* 5 (2014): 31-58.

of metals. He has been dreaming of writing the absolute Book, an "architectural and premeditated (Book)," which would be the "orphic explanation of the Earth."[23] It would be THE Book. There would be only one, the book "attempted unconsciously by anyone who writes."[24] Then Mallarmé mentions *La Dernière Mode*, a fashion magazine that he wrote by himself: "If at some point, despairing of the despotic Book released from myself (*désespérant du despotique bouquin lâché de moi-même*), I have after a few articles disseminated here and there, attempted to write all by myself, clothes, jewels, furniture, and even theatrical reviews and dinner menus, a magazine, *La Dernière Mode*, whose eight or ten published issues still serve, when I dust them out, to make me dream for a long time."[25]

The publication date of *The Latest Fashion*: 1874 sends us a few years *after* an intense crisis experienced by Mallarmé. In 1866-67 Mallarmé had had a vision of absolute Beauty akin to Nothingness. He ventured into "Darkness Absolute." Since then, one can say that Mallarmé's letters, his published poems, these women's magazines and the notes for an unfinished "Book" all converge—but how?[26] Blanchot has demonstrated in the *Book to Come* that Mallarmé's absolute "Book" could only be thought of in the future, and objected to Jacques Scherer's presentation of the Notes for the Book as if they had constituted the actual book.[27] But later Roger Dragonetti, in *Un fantôme dans le kiosque*, took an opposite position. For

---

23   S. Mallarmé, *Correspondance: Lettres sur la poésie*, edited by B. Marchal (Gallimard: Folio, 1995), 585.

24   Ibid., 586.

25   Ibid*.,* 587.

26   See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Ghosts of Modernity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 84-121.

27   See Maurice Blanchot, "Le Livre à Venir" in *Le Livre à Venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 270-97. Blanchot debunks

him, the Book had been composed, albeit in fragments, and disseminated in letters, postcards, and ephemeral essays. Mallarmé's dream of the absolute Book had led to its dialectical counterpart, the contingent inscription of an evanescent author caught up in the futility of everyday life. Thus, the only realisation of Mallarmé's *Book* would be his correspondence.[28]

Mallarmé became an actor in the social world, busying himself with occasional verse written for anniversaries, banquets, commemorations, burials, even the "*loisirs de la poste,*" quatrains on envelopes displaying the addressee and the address that French postmen had to decipher in order to deliver the contents. Verses were written on fans, fruits, packages of candies, tobacco, or coffee. Since the absolute "Book" was lacking, poetry had to occupy a decorative function: ornamentation was the bourgeois translation of an ontological futility.

Mallarmé's sudden death in 1898 at the age of 56 appears as a self-fulfilling prophecy: he died of a laryngeal spasm, a physical demise staging the "elocutionary disappearance" of a poet rendered mute, killed by the discrepancy between the aspiration to the *Livre* and the awareness that it could never be fulfilled. The blueprint for the Book was Mallarmé's last and most ambitions poetic effort, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance." The Book would have aimed at recapturing from religion its fundamental structure—the vision of the Absolute. The Book would have gathered collective rituals but replaced religion as such. Some notes suggest that Mallarmé saw the future performances of the Book as equivalent of the Mass, an "office" in which absence and lack dominate. Like Rilke's Orpheus, the poet becomes a pure trace that can be

Le "Livre" de Mallarmé, edited by Jacques Schérer (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

28   Roger Dragonetti, *Un fantôme dans le kiosque: Mallarmé et l'esthétique du quotidien* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

called writing. Chance as "hazard"—literally a "throw of
the dice" in Arabic, as Mallarmé knew—provides a figure
of endless incompletion. But are we actually dealing with
modernism here? I would say we are, because we are in
the open "chance" of writing.

What can explain the difference between the modern-
ism of 1913 and that of 1922 was the delay imposed by the
Great War. Joyce and Proust were able to make the most
of the extra time they had gained, expanding their works
greatly, whereas Pound, despite a flurry of editorial activ-
ity, did not—it's true that he was just starting his *Cantos*
in 1917. The delay allowed Joyce and Proust to reconsider
their books as books. On the other hand, a poet like Pound
quoted Brancusi's statement several times; the most ex-
plicit occurrence is in Canto 97:

> "Not difficult to make"
> said Brancusi
> "mais nous, de nous mettre en état DE les faire."
> "Je peux commencer une chose tous les jours,
> mais fi-- -- -- nir!" [29]

It would take too long to discuss Pound's inability to
complete the *Cantos*… Now, it almost looks as if the com-
pletion of À *la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and *Ulysses*
were exceptions. What were the specific conditions for
their completion? First, Proust and Joyce began with a
plan that was flexible enough to expand over time and also
to include many different types of texts (a play in *Ulysses,*
essays on homosexuality in À *la Recherche)*. Then, they
both changed the way psychology works in literature by
creating characters on to whom they could graft many

---

29   Ezra Pound, Canto XCVII, in *The Cantos* (New York:
New Directions, 1996), 697.

different features while turning them into allegories of the work itself.

What happened with those who did not complete their half-realised projects? The symptom of incompletion dominates in the German-speaking world: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil, Kafka—on the other hand, one can point to Hermann Broch or Thomas Mann... Kafka's *Trial* provides a counter-example because its ending was written in advance, which did not prevent it from being abandoned, with many drafts of supplementary chapters left aside; it is now impossible to know where they would have been placed in the original structure.

I will focus on case studies so as to contrast the 1913 interminability with Hofmannsthal's Venetian novel and 1922 interminability with Kafka's *Castle*. *Andreas or the Reunited Ones* is a riddle. It is the only novel in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's career, which began early. In 1890, at the age of sixteen, the poet was feted as a child prodigy in Vienna. This career ended abruptly in July 1929: he died from a stroke after having heard the news of his son Franz's suicide. Hofmannsthal spent time and effort on the novel never completed that stands out as his prose masterpiece. The novel's meaning remains difficult to ascertain, even if its importance in German literature is undeniable. In June 1907, Hofmannsthal, staying in the Lido in Venice, began drafting a narrative entitled "Venice Travel Diary of the Herr von N. (1779)." We follow young Andreas who arrives to Venice one fine day of 1778. In 1912, Hofmannsthal added two fragments of 25 pages and then main section in 1913 that went to eighty-five pages. Then he kept on adding notes.

The beginning offers a variation on the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*. Twenty-two-year-old Andreas has been sent to Italy by his rich and noble parents to complete his education. The narrative begins when Andreas reaches Venice. He meets a strange half-naked man in the street

who takes him to the noble but impoverished palace of count Prampero. Andreas meets the members of the family: Nina, the elder daughter, formerly an actress, now a prostitute; Zustina, about to offer her virginity as the prize in a lottery destined to save the family from ruin. Resting in the room Andreas relives in a flashback his travels from Austria.

Having left Vienna and reached Villach on his horse, Andreas is preyed upon by Gotthilff, a slightly older man who insists he has to be hired as a servant. Andreas accepts. Gotthilff is impudent, salacious, sexually promiscuous. His sexual banter leads Andreas to fantasise having sex with a countess; he pulls his reins, the other falls. They stop at the home of a noble family, the Finazzers who welcome Andreas and his servant. There is a beautiful daughter, Romana. Gotthilff, more and more truculent, seduces the maid. Romana takes Andreas to visit the village; a first kiss ensues. Andreas hopes to enter her bed at night. Woken from nightmares by screams, he rushes out to see the wanton maid strapped half-naked to a bed which Gotthilff has set on fire; he has fled with Andreas's horse and stolen the money sewn in the saddle. Andreas feels responsible for the crime. He remembers an incident from his childhood: he killed his dog at the age of 12. He rushes to the woods where he has a vision of his life with Romana. But she asks: where is the dog buried? Another vision of the future follows—a promise that he will possess Romana, no matter what he does. The travelogue will double as a coming of age story cannot, with hints of sexual initiation and mystical discovery.

After Mallarmé, Hofmannsthal had witnessed the crisis in language that defines a modernist sensibility and he dramatised this discovery in the 1902 "Letter of Lord Chandos." To overcome the linguistic crisis, Hofmannsthal left the aesthetic sphere and moved to considerations of ethics. Hence the leitmotif of *Andreas:* guilt. Andreas feels

disgraced, tainted by his servant's sadistic treatment of the farm-girl. He will make amends to the family of the woman he dreams of marrying, remembering how Romana looked at him in horror while they untied the maid from the burning bed.

Andreas returns to his earlier stop on the way and catches up with Gotthilf—who turns out to be an escaped convict, and is arrested. Ironically, his name meant God's help. But help is lacking. The "sin," as the maid said, of which Andreas partakes, echoes childhood memories of cruelty to animals. Andreas feels touched by ethics; the ethical moment can be defined as the moment when someone is touched by the infinite, a belief shared by Wittgenstein and von Hoffmannsthal. Meanwhile, the title of *Andreas or the Reunited Ones* presents yet another riddle. Does it predict a happy ending if Romana and Andreas are reunited? Is the young man aiming at finding unity in himself? The reconciliation of drives and urges moving from wild sexuality to forms of betrothal and courtly love has to make room for the ethical law, which is posited as a condition for any overcoming of the fragmentation of experience. Venice is a confusing, decadent, and theatrical world. This "disunion" appears in the character of Maria, a young widow in the middle of a schizophrenic crisis. As Maria, she wishes to be dead, as Mariquita she is sensual and seductive. A sexual union between Maria and Andreas was planned. After that, she would enter a convent while Andreas would return to Romana. This is one ending among many others. Plans and notes began to proliferate, incidents were added, new journeys and tangential developments inserted. The text remained open as the author sketched new episodes and meditations. Years passed, and theses drafts incorporated quotes and references to all the books that Hofmannsthal was reading, touching on topics as diverse as myth, the unconscious, the history of Venice and Austria, war, poetry, mysticism, travels. *Andreas* is thus struggling against the

"monster of totality" as Barthes would say,[30] but suffers the fate of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet,* Mallarmé's *Livre,* Musil's *Man Without Qualities* and Kafka's novels.

Hermann Broch wrote that Hofmannsthal was not looking for completion and publication but for "self-interpretation, self-contemplation, and self-education." But as he notes, music always offered a way out. *Andreas* was left unfinished when Hofmannsthal wrote the libretto for *Woman Without a Shadow* for Strauss. The resolution of his literary dilemma was to combine words and music, which proves that the Viennese joyful apocalypse—a cliché that had been made current by Hermann Broch in various essays and letters—is an operatic music capable of drowning anxiety by staging a fake joy. By investing his only "novel" with all his serious preoccupations, Hofmannsthal had come too close to Kafka's modernism, a mode of writing fraught with angst and paradoxes.

In January 1922, Kafka started writing furiously despite being gravely ill. He did not stop until early September, when he gave up on the project. As Reiner Stach's biography describes *Castle Notebook VI*, made available in 1982, the manuscript version of the last pages testify to a crisis: "The plot begins to unravel, various attempts and variants compete with one another, the deletions get longer and more complicated, and it is obvious that Kafka was working against strong resistance, as though he were rolling an ever-growing mass uphill."[31] One might speculate on the reasons for this curious dereliction, a term understood both as the state of having been abandoned and become dilapidated and a failure to fulfil one's obligations.

In *The Castle*, one the most important decisions made by Kafka as he wrote was to change the mode of narration

---

30   Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes,* translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 179.

31   Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, translated by Shelley Frisch (Princeton University Press, 2013), 467.

from a first-person perspective to a third person narrative. The "I" having turned into a "He," we wander with K. the land surveyor in a village that calls up Troy seen from the perspective of Odysseus. K. arrives in the village in the hope that the castle he finds there as having control over everything can and will be penetrated. He imagines that penetration will be possible thanks to a constant struggle in which cunning and seduction are his weapons. In fact, his very attempts to enter make the Castle shift and move for its shape and definitions change all the time. K. must adapt his ploys and strategies all the time, and in the process reaches near exhaustion.

K. believes all the more in the castle's power as he is not allowed inside. The more his conviction grows, the more the castle recedes. The name of the owner, Count Westwest, suggests a constant retreat of the source of power. There is always a West West of the West on a round earth: one pursues it until one returns to one's starting point. Little happens to K. in the novel beyond wandering around, talking to townspeople, complaining that the castle does not make him feel welcome. Townspeople have given up the struggle for meaning and let the Castle govern their lives in total arbitrariness. Within this general resignation, sexual desire remains as a link between the Castle and the Town. It is quite uninhibited, as the story of Amalia being shunned by all the others for refusing sexual favours to Sortini makes clear. The main action of the Castle officials is sleeping with the women of the village, some of whom feel very grateful for the favour, as is the case with Frieda at first, when she is Klamm's mistress—and Gardena, the landlady, fondly remembers her time with Klamm. However, the officials are grotesque in appearance, or else abrupt, tyrannical or elderly and dim-witted. Behind this gallery of figures looms the shadow of the Castle, which often appears as only a shadow. The castle is a metonymy for the source of power that only

appears in its disappearance. *Schloss* means "lock" as well as "castle": the castle is not only invisible, absent, but also locked away. K. cannot have it because it is not for him; this rejection is meant for K. only.

Max Brod explains Kafka's plan as follows: K. would "gain partial satisfaction" and "does not slacken in his struggle but dies of exhaustion." He adds: "The community gathers around his deathbed, and just then the decision comes down from the castle that although he has no legal claim to live in the village, considering certain circumstances, he is permitted to live and work there."[32] K. only wins when it is too late, a pattern that reminds us of the logic of exclusion displayed in "Before the Law," the parable given by the priest at the end of *The Trial.* Textually this is marked by a steady proliferation of subplots after K's break-up with Frieda.

As K. progresses, he feels more and more exhausted (he falls asleep several times while the secretary Bürgel bores him to death with technical details in a wonderful parody of legalese,[33] and then has a curious dream about a Greek god,[34] and the narrative embranchments keep multiplying). Pepi, the vivacious and seductive young servant has convinced K. that he should move in with her and other girls, Amalia's family offers a refuge, and K. has a soft spot for Amalia; finally, there is Hans's mother glimpsed at the beginning who remains a tantalising possibility, since at some point K. befriends Hans and plans to exploit the boy's trust in him. The obvious cunning deployed in his scheme to enlist Hans's assistance makes Frieda suspicious of K.'s motives.

---

32   Stach quotes Max Brod's advance publication of his afterword to the first edition of *The Castle* in the *Berliner Tagblatt* of December 1, 1926 (Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, 468).

33   *The Castle*, translated by Mark Harman (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 260, 263, 264.

34   Ibid., 265.

K. discovers that each character has a different, incomplete and biased theory about the Castle. These perspectives become harder to control in a single narrative. The helpers in whom K. trusted so much like Barnabas, his living connection with Castle officials is shown later to be an inexperienced messenger whose first task was to deal with K. Close to the end, K. leaves Olga's house and bumps into Jeremias. He does not recognise him at first: his former assistant, now his successful rival, looks older and also "wearier, more wrinkled, but with a fuller face." Jeremias, changed because of his liaison with Frieda, tells K. that he and Arthur had been sent only to cheer him up! The *Trial* has a lot in common with Proust's main insight in *In Search of Lost Time,* in which the narrator keeps moving from one point of view to another. Whereas Proust used the discovery that appearances keep changing in time and had it contribute to the closure at the end when the narrator decides to renounce their seductions and sit down to write the novel we have been reading, such a closure was forbidden to Kafka.

The paradox that ends up blocking the novel's unfolding is that by questioning the authority of the Castle and seeing its many contradictions appear, the text undermines the validity of K's quest. The more K. becomes sceptical about the transcendental values in which the Castle finds its legitimacy, the more he doubts his own motivations. By dissolving the local mystifications and delusions, he loses his illusions about the benefits of continuing the quest and reaching the Castle; similarly, the narrator loses the sense that the novel can be completed. A structure of exclusion has been replaced by uncontrollable proliferation. The solution would be that of Mallarmé, that is to imagine: an infinite writing—as we see in "The Burrow." *Der Bau,* one of the last texts, could not be completed, or perhaps the last page was torn out and burned, according to different accounts—the truth is that we will never know…

Is this pattern linking Mallarmé in late 1898 and Kafka in 1922 also verifiable after WWII? To try and answer, I will analyse one of Beckett's many unfinished works: it is "From an abandoned work,"[35] the first text written directly in English after *Watt.* Its autobiographical aspects are obvious. We recognise the son's departure from a home in which the mother stays alone, wringing her hands in grief. The son exhibits Oedipal remorse because he feels that he has killed his father, which triggers a wish to escape "anywhere out of the world" while in fact he is going nowhere. The title puns on abandonment, from the birth trauma to leaving one's home as an adult, while describing its own status: Beckett never completed the draft. Thoughts without a subject do not readily accept closure or enclosure.

The affects triggered by the subject's sense of being abandoned are marked by ambivalence: rage and guilt, desire and disgust, haste and procrastination. The libidinal release of pent-up drives clashes with the repression of a super-egoic law. Meaning is condensed in images of animals, like a white horse and white stoats, creatures that emerge to block the progression of the narrator. The opening presents him leaving his mother's house who is presented "weeping and waving."[36] But then he cannot go back home because animals hinder his progression:

> Feeling all this, how violent and the kind of day, I stopped and turned. So back with bowed head on the look out for a snail, slug or worm. Great love in my heart too for all things still and rooted, bushes, boulders and the like, too numerous to mention, even the flowers of the field, not for the world when in my right senses would I ever touch one, to pluck it. Whereas a bird now,

---

35   Samuel Beckett, "From an Abandoned Work" in *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989,* edited by S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 155-164.

36   Ibid., 155.

or a butterfly, fluttering about and getting in my way, all moving things, getting in my path, a slug now, getting under my feet, no, no mercy. Not that I'd go out of my way to get at them, no, at a distance often they seemed still, then a moment later they were upon me. Birds with my piercing sight I have seen flying so high, so far, that they seemed at rest, then the next minute they were all about me, crows have done this. Ducks are perhaps the worst, to be suddenly stamping and stumbling in the midst of ducks, or hens, any class of poultry, few things are worse. Nor will I go out of my way to avoid such things, when avoidable, no, I simply will not go out of my way, though I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way.[37]

Animals signal the narrator's paranoia: the more he attacks them, the more they present obstacles; on the other hand, they also offer solace because of their links with fantasies. In a text propelled forward by rhetorical gushes, animal life is dominated by the opposition between motion and immobility:

… no birds at me, nothing across my path except at a great distance a white horse followed by a boy, or it might have been a small man or a woman. This is the only completely white horse I remember, what I believe the Germans call a Schimmel [...]. The sun was full upon it, as shortly before on my mother, and it seemed to have a red band or stripe running down its side, I thought perhaps a bellyband, perhaps the horse was going somewhere to be harnessed, to a trap or such-like. It crossed my path a long way off, then vanished behind greenery, I suppose, all I noticed was the sudden appearance of the horse, then disappearance.[38]

37   Ibid., 155-56.
38   Ibid., 156-57.

A psychoanalyst like Bion would identify the horse with the mother, given the original mystery for the infant of the appearance and disappearance of her breast. The presence and absence of the mother associated with the colour white, skin and milk, leads to a German word calling up the image of "shimmering" in the memory. Here is the fusion between the foreign and homely: the mother's body. Having evoked sudden rages that blind him, the narrator remembers that he studied Milton, impressing his father with his knowledge. He adds: "Never loved anyone I think, I'd remember. Except in my dreams, and there it was animals, dream animals, nothing like what you see in the country, I couldn't describe them, lovely creatures they were, white, mostly."[39] The Freudian wink is "I'd remember." Beckett knows about Oedipal wishes and their repression, and how repression affects memory. The white animals are substitutes for the mother who is both desired and rejected.

The second act of the Oedipal fantasy is punishment. The narrator thinks he has killed both father and mother but is not sure: "My father, did I kill him too as well as my mother, perhaps in a way I did, but I can't go into that now, much too old and weak."[40] Indeed, the father may have been "killed" in his Oedipal fantasies while the mother was "killed" by the son's departure. The son imagines his demise in a vision split up between the earth and the sky. The earth is the chthonian world beneath with its "conqueror worms." The realm above, with its white animals, keeps some symbols of beauty. The fantasy makes the narrator go under the surface, drift through earth and rocks, down into the sea:

---

39   Ibid., 158.
40   Ibid., 159.

A ton of worms in an acre, that is a wonderful thought, a ton of worms, I believe it. Where did I get it, from a dream, or a book read in a nook when a boy, or a word overheard as I went along, or in me all along and kept under till it could give me joy, these are the kind of horrid thoughts that I have to contend with in the way I have said. Now is there nothing to add to this day with the white horse and white mother in the window, please read again my descriptions of these, before I get on to some other day at a later time… What happens now is I was set on and pursued by a family or tribe, I do not know, of stoats, a most extraordinary thing, I think they were stoats. [...] Anyone else would have been bitten and bled to death, perhaps sucked white, like a rabbit, there is that word white again.[41]

The emphatic use of the verb "think," "I think they were stoats," "I can think these thoughts," betrays a Freudian over-determination allied with Bion's theory of thinking without a subject. "Stoats" is a pun linking the animals with wild thoughts, thoughts are left in a wild state, rabid and fluctuating. If thoughts can be created without my knowledge, without any subject, such a process also happens when my body does its duty without my knowledge of its workings. This idea was the starting point for Arnold Geulincx, the post-Cartesian philosopher of humility in whom Beckett immersed himself in the 1930s. If I can't know what happens when my limbs move, I assume that God knows, and even moves me. If Beckett's "abandoned" text ends without ending (its actual draft went on for a few more sentences) it is because it releases the mechanical autonomy of a world and a body that can go on without the intervention of the narrator: "… you could lie there for weeks and no one hear you, I often thought of that up in

---

41   Ibid., 161.

the mountains, no, that is a foolish thing to say, just went on, my body doing its best without me."[42] The autonomous text continues its infinite progress alone.

For Bion there are thoughts that have no thinker, hence thinking is very close to infinity: "Thoughts exist without a thinker. The idea of infinitude is prior to any idea of the finite. The finite is 'won from the dark and formless infinite.'"[43] Here, we find a link between the unfinished unfinishable and infinity. The abandoned text is generated in the abandoned home of the Oedipal drama, which generates an abandoned subject who will never be able to finish his ruminations…

Like Musil's unfinished *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,* Beckett felt that he had remained too close to the Oedipal plot… Musil's last volume entitled *Into the Millennium (The Criminals)*, is about Ulrich's sister Agathe (who enters the novel at the end of the second book). They experience a mystically incestuous attraction to each other after their father's death. They are soul mates, true Siamese twins. As it was published, the novel ends in a large section of drafts, notes, false-starts and forays written by Musil who tried more and more desperately to work out the proper ending for his book, and failed.

This would lead to a crucial question: can we unify the world of Austrian modernism in which Kafka, Musil and Hofmannsthal seem to agree on a certain type of failure, and Beckett's own paradigm of failure? This could rebound as another question: Are there different modernisms, or can we define one modernism that would cover all these different manifestations? If we return to Freud's essay on terminability and interminability, we may remember that

---

42   Ibid., 164.

43   Wilfred Ruprecht Bion, *Second Thoughts: Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1993), 165.

he gave a good tip: we just need more theory, which would yield three main options.

One: Duchamp. Creative incompletion is kept controlled and seen as a temporary negation; then this very negation is negated. This is how Marcel Duchamp worked with his Large Glass, "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even." Duchamp worked on the ambitious work consisting of two metal panels holding a double allegory in glass, the bride on top, bachelors at the bottom, from 1915 to 1923. Already in 1918, Duchamp's focus had moved from the purely machine-like representations of sexual desire to an engagement with time, speed and kinetic devices (like the later *rotoreliefs*). In 1923, Duchamp decided that he was bored by the world of art and artists and that he wanted to focus on chess. He went back to Paris with the ambition of becoming a chess champion.

He called the Large Glass "definitively unfinished"[44] and exhibited it as such—what is it that shows it was left unfinished? The "nine shots," those holes whose location was found when they were shot from a toy cannon; they were to receive the emanations from the bachelors below. Duchamp did not object to the Large Glass being exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. When it was stored after that show, the two panels being stacked on top of each other, the glass broke. Duchamp discovered this accident five years later. He came back to the US and spent two full months in the summer of 1936 patiently reassembling the glass pieces, putting all the pieces together as an immense puzzle. He finished work on July 31, 1936. Then he included the Large Glass in his box containing replicas of all his works. As he stated, the cracks had improved the work: "There is a symmetry in the cracking… There is almost

---

44   This is the title of an excellent collection edited by Thierry de Duve, *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992).

an intention here—a curious extra intention that I am not responsible for, an intention made by the piece itself, what I call a 'ready-made' intention..."[45]

Duchamp released his preparatory notes for the Glass in the Green Box in 1934. The happy accident of the shattered glass released an extra dimension that somehow "unfinished" the previous blockage. Duchamp produced an engraving called *The Large Glass completed* in 1965, at the request of Arturo Schwarz. Jean Suquet then published an extensive explanation of what should have been in the work had it been finished according to the Notes. A big spiral links the bachelors to the bride, anchored by the holes of the nine shots. In the transformation from a "definitive" to an "indefinitive" incompletion, Duchamp invented conceptual art while inserting the fourth dimension of time, with its contradictions and metamorphoses in the work itself. Since time is by definition open and thus infinite, its dialectical sweep entails that in the same way as no completion is definitive, no incompletion can be seen as an ultimate end.

Two: Eliot and Derrida. Here, in this option, incompletion is an effect of structure. As such, incompletion appears very much like Derrida's structure of deferral sending us to a modern concept of writing as fragmented. Writing suggests a different temporality with constant delays similar to the "delay in glass" of the Big Glass, to use a term coined by Duchamp. If we go back to early Anglo-American modernism, we find this theme treated by the younger Eliot, the Eliot of Prufrock's "There will be time…":

45　　　Qtd. by Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Holt, 1996), 308.

> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create…[46]

This was written in the shadow of Jules Laforgue, a poet who died young and never really delivered his Mallarméan book either. Like Derrida, Eliot points to the endless deferral of the text. This point had been seen by Freud in an early letter to Fliess in which he mentions "the asymptotic conclusion of the treatment"—meaning its apparent endlessness.[47] However, for Eliot, this idea appeared and then a mythical closure seemed to offer a solution, as we see in the famous essay from 1923, "*Ulysses*, order and myth."

Three: Redemption against Myth. "Myth" would be rejected both by Adorno and Benjamin. A better way would be to rethink Benjamin's concept of Redemption, a key to the link between past and present and closure. Thus, interminability should not be read as "postmodern" *avant la lettre*, but as the most lasting legacy of modernism.

Benjamin's composition of the enormous and unfinished *Arcades Project* was an attempt at creating order in a literary and philosophical collection. Benjamin evoked in "Unpacking my library" the "bliss of the collector" that was not limited to possession of rare items but approximated the happiness of whoever can contemplate history as a field of ruins and fragments, and thus learns to be more alive in the present. Benjamin notes that we do not envy the future, only the past: we cannot know the future,

----

46   T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, 1965), 4.

47   Sigmund Freud, Letter to Fliess 16 April 1900, in *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904*, translated and edited by Jeffrey Moussaieff Mason (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 409.

only imagine it. No pleasure or displeasure will taint projections beyond hope…

> The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply.[48]

If we tease out the economic metaphors of the concept of redemption, we note that to "redeem" means to "buy back" and to "save," to "release" from bondage or sin. However, Benjamin does not believe that life will be saved when beautified by art, as Proust did. The paradoxical happiness in which the idea of salvation resides is "founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours." Benjamin adds: "Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time. Or to put it differently, the genuine concept of historical time rests entirely upon the image of redemption."[49]

We collect so as to recollect, thus turning into the curators of an always unfinished and unfinishable archive. This

---

48   Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 254.
49   Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 479.

is the archive that I call modernism, an archive that can never become a totality. Like modernism, no collection can ever be complete. Discrete objects can be placed in an organised space and time and form a living encyclopaedia, but the encyclopaedia will not be closed on itself. Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project,* it will remain unfinished; here is the condition for a revolutionary awakening. In the same way as there is no absolute language, there is no absolute collection, no end nor end point to modernism. Because the absolute is lacking, the task of the collector includes loving all the modernist things and texts that will have to be redeemed; this sketches the task awaiting all serious readers, those who are aware that modernism has not ended because it could not end. The task looks contradictory because on the one hand it suggests that we will need to keep open a discontinuous history of modernisms in the plural, while on the other hand we long for a modernism that remains a singular entity.

Randall Stevenson

SOMEHOW SUCCESSIVE AND CONTINUOUS: BERGSON AND THE MODERNIST MOMENT RECONSIDERED[1]

Virginia Woolf experienced a surprising summer in 1927. Bettering her expectations, *To the Lighthouse* had sold 3,160 copies by July. Woolf found she could afford a motor car, acquiring a second-hand, dark-blue Singer for £275. Though she had previously considered motoring a threat to the tranquillity of rural life, her new purchase evidently helped to change her mind. As she records in her essay "Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car," she came to appreciate the ease of access motoring offered to the countryside and its "beauty and beauty and beauty." Some reservation, or suggestion of excess, nevertheless remains in that triple repetition of "beauty." This is confirmed by her tripartite description of "beauty spread at one's right hand, at one's left; at one's back too," yet somehow "escaping all the time" as "the car sped along." Woolf records that she is "overcome" by all she sees and "cannot hold this," finding that "the self splits up"—not

into three but four separate identities—under the pressure of diverse, rapidly alternating perceptions.[2]

Similar reservations—with some wide-ranging implications for modernist writing, and for the experience of modernity generally—figure in the novel Woolf began writing later in 1927, *Orlando*, published the following year. This describes how "nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish" during its heroine's rapid drive out of London. Dazzled by dozens of diverse impressions, Orlando soon becomes "a person entirely disassembled," unable to sustain the mind's "illusion of holding things within itself." Instead, *Orlando* records, "after twenty minutes the body and mind were like scraps of torn paper"—unavoidably, as "the process of motoring fast ... so much resembles the chopping up small of identity."[3] Difficulties in "seeing whole"—in maintaining integral vision and identity, despite the accelerating pace of the modern age—would have been familiar to Woolf, in other ways, too, before she purchased her dark-blue Singer. Rail travel offers a similar challenge, as *To the Lighthouse* describes—a sense of things "happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time, as a traveller, even though he is half asleep, knows, looking out of the train window, that he must look now, for he will never see that town, or that mule-cart, or that woman at work in the fields, again."[4] This sense of the uniquely momentary likewise shapes the novel's description of "a pool at evening far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the

---

2   Virginia Woolf, "Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 6, *1933-1941 and Additional Essays 1906-1924*, edited by Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2011), 454.

3   Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 217.

4   Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 220.

pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen."[5]

For commentators such as Lynne Kirby and Laura Marcus, transient, ever-changing vision of this kind suggests an analogue, even an origin, for another key technologic and cultural influence on the modern age—the cinema. Analogies between film and train are in one way obvious. Anyone who watches a train passing, particularly after dark—with near-identical scenes flashing by in each of its carriage windows—can hardly fail to think of film's reliance on rapidly-successive still images. Yet it is "the analogical relationship between film motion and locomotion," as Marcus calls it, for observers *on* a train—encountering a film-like montage of diverse, rapidly alternating scenes—that most interests each critic. As Kirby remarks,

> the kind of perception that came to characterize the experience of the passenger on the train became that of the spectator in the cinema…
>
> The cinema can be said to be heir to the railroad ... [which] prepared a path for the institutionalisation of a certain kind of subject or spectator that cinema would claim as its own, a subject moulded in relation to new forms of perception, leisure, temporality, and modern technology.[6]

As Marcus notes, this "correlation between locomotion and cinema ... symbiotic relationship between the train and the film" was immediately apparent to pioneering film-makers, evident in the Lumière brothers' celebrated choice of subject for one of their first productions

---

5   Ibid., 147-8.

6   Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 7, 24.

shown publicly, *Arrival of a Train in a Station* (1895).[7] As Thomas Mann suggests in *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*, 1924), early cinema audiences had further cause to compare experience of cinema and transport as a result of the unsteady projection of early films and their sometimes-clumsy succession of scenes. When Mann's protagonist visits the cinema, he finds—comparably to Woolf's central figure in *Orlando*—that the life which "flitted across the screen" is merely "life chopped into small sections, fleeting, accelerated; a restless, jerky fluctuation of appearing and disappearing."[8]

"Life chopped into small sections" in the visions cinema offers—and in the technology which delivers them— offered a perfect target and a convenient metaphor for the philosophy of Henri Bergson. In popular lectures he delivered at the Collège de France in 1902, Bergson is mindful of his audience's limited familiarity with a still-newish technology, taking care to explain cinematography's reliance on "a series of snapshots ... instantaneous views [thrown] on the screen, so that they replace each other very rapidly."[9] Later published as *Creative Evolution* (*L'évolution créatrice*, 1907), his lectures also explain how inimical he considers this "series of snapshots" to the true representation of life and experience. Throughout his philosophy, Bergson stresses that—as he remarks in *La perception du changement* (1911)—"*all change, all movement*," and ultimately all life must be considered "*absolutely indivisible*,"

---

7   Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modern Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22, 67, 68.

8   Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter (1928; London: Vintage, 1999), 315.

9   Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (London: Macmillan, 1911), 322.

and never as "a series of successive states."[10] Such views made him an implacable adversary of anything seeking to "chop up" experience into separate segments—of ideas of a measurable, quantifiable "time which our clocks divide into equal proportions" as much as of the apparatus of cinema.[11] His philosophy might nevertheless have taken a more generous view of the latter, as films at least create out of their static images an *impression* of continuous movement. Yet for Bergson, this was exactly the problem: that the cinematograph creates only an impression, artificially and mechanically fabricated. Its "contrivance" in this way resembles, he considers, "*the mechanism of our ordinary knowledge*."[12] Concepts, ideas, words and language—intellection generally—offer only "snapshots ... of the passing reality": conveniently manageable, but fundamentally misleading, as their static, separated status obscures the fluid, continuous "inner becoming of things ... the very life of things."[13]

Committed to valorising continuity over stasis, Bergson's thinking leads him to re-examine—in *Creative Evolution* and elsewhere in his philosophy—the paradoxes of Zeno of Elea, dependent on the assumption that movement can be separated into a series of immobilities. This interest in the Eleatic paradoxes was shared by a significantly wide range of contemporary philosophers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Bertrand Russell, A.N. Whitehead, and Samuel Alexander. Despite

---

10   Henri Bergson, *La perception du changement: conférences faites à l'université d'Oxford le 26 et 27 Mai 1911* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 18, 22. Bergson's italics. My translation.

11   Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, translated by F.L. Pogson (1910; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 107.

12   Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 322-323.

13   Ibid., 322, 334.

their antiquity, paradoxes of movement, fragmentation and change naturally acquired renewed relevance at a time when "new forms of perception," and of travel and technology, increasingly left "life chopped into small sections," or a "fluctuation of appearing and disappearing." New forms of thinking involved appear in contemporary physics as much as philosophy. By 1887, experimental evidence had accumulated to support James Clerk Maxwell's view of radiation as continuous and wave-like in form. Thereafter, anomalies in experiment and observation led towards new theories of energy's existence primarily as quanta—separate, particulate units. By 1918, the award of the Nobel Prize to Max Planck confirmed acceptance of these new theories, or at any rate a recognition that energy had to be conceived in terms of a wave-particle duality.

Bergson's thought, and his use of cinematography as a metaphor, might therefore be considered indicative, and characteristic, of the general outlook of his age. His thinking has also been regularly considered definitive of the priorities of modernist literature. The kind of resentment Bergson expresses towards "time which our clocks divide into equal proportions" figures similarly in Woolf's descriptions in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) of how "shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished."[14]

For Woolf, as for Bergson, time is conceived as a continuous whole: a "mound," invidiously infringed by the divisiveness of clocks. Many of Woolf's fellow modernists likewise resembled Bergson in finding this divisiveness—and other stresses in the years after the Great

---

14   Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 113.

War—best avoided by turning away from the social world and its conventional habits of thought. By relying less on "intellection" and more on intuition, Bergson suggests, the indivisible continuity of "duration"—"the very life of things"—may be more truly apprehended.[15] "Nowhere," he stresses, "is the reality of change so visible, so palpable, as in the domain of interior life."[16] "True duration"—"*durée*"; the "inner becoming of things"; the true unfolding of time and life—can most readily be discerned in "the continuous melody of our interior life—a melody which goes on, indivisibly, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence."[17] For many critics, it is the pursuit of melodies of this kind which produces the streams of consciousness and interior monologues characteristic of modernist writing, including Woolf's own.

How directly modernist strategies may be *owed* to Bergson is nevertheless another question. It received its most decisive answer in Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man* (1927). Lewis considered Bergson "more than any other single figure ... responsible for the main intellectual characteristics of the world we live in," adding that without his influence, "there would be no *Ulysses*, or there would be no *A La Recherche du Temps perdu*."[18] Later commentators have followed Lewis at most restrainedly, identifying Bergsonian characteristics in the work of Woolf, Faulkner, Proust, Joyce and others without necessarily assuming features concerned were derived exclusively from Bergson's ideas. Bergson and writers he supposedly influenced are better understood as exhibiting cognate responses to "new perceptions" and "modern technology." Modernist literature can be validly

---

15   Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 334.
16   Bergson, *La perception du changememt*, 26.
17   Ibid.
18   Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 166, 105.

considered "Bergsonian" if the term is used comparatively rather than causally—highlighting features in the writing concerned, independently of Lewis's cruder assumption that philosophical ideas were always directly their inspiration. Bergson's work can offer some genuine advantages if considered in this way—making explicit, in terms of clear philosophical ideas, responses to the modern age which may inform literature more implicitly.

Further questions about Bergson's relation to modernism arise because critics are sometimes sceptical even of analogies which might be drawn between his views and later literature. In her essay "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time," Ann Banfield points out that Woolf claimed never to have read Bergson, and identifies other potential antecedents—in Cambridge philosophy—for her practices. Among these practices Banfield highlights a valuation of discrete, intense instants, suggesting that for Woolf "time passes not as *durée* but as a series of still moments."[19] Rather than reflecting only the fragmentation described in *Orlando*, such moments can offer the kind of illuminating, memorable intensification of experience discussed in the opening paragraph of *To the Lighthouse.* This reflects on how a "turn in the wheel of sensation" may have "the power to crystallize and transfix the moment on which its gloom or radiance rests." Lily Briscoe similarly considers, later in the novel, the "meaning which, for no reason at all, as perhaps they are stepping out of the Tube or ringing a doorbell, descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative." The existence "for a moment" of this sudden illumination—in this case, as Prue catches a ball "brilliantly high up in her left hand"—Lily thinks of as a "spell," and it is of a kind whose influence is shown shaping characters'

---

19   Ann Banfield, "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time," *Poetics Today*, 24:3 (Fall 2003), 471.

memories, as well as their immediate experience, at several points in *To the Lighthouse*.[20] Wondering if she might ask Mr Carmichael what he recalls of past experiences with the Ramsay family, for example, Lily finds herself completely preoccupied by a single remembered image of Mrs Ramsay on the beach. "Why," she asks, "after all these years had that survived, ringed round, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank, and all after it blank, for miles and miles? ... as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing silently."[21]

Lily's question about the highlighted, "ringed around" aspect of recollected images might be directed at other modernist novels, including ones, such as *Remembrance of Things Past* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-27) most often assumed to share Bergson's view of the continuity of interior life. Even Proust's celebrated episode of the "petite madeleine" might be susceptible to such questioning. Finding that "all the flowers in our garden and M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village ... sprang into being ... from my cup of tea," Marcel experiences a moment sharply crystallised or "ringed around" by the intensity of sensations he experiences.[22] Other memorious moments in the novel, such as his encounter with the uneven paving stone at Guermantes, or the recollection of Swann ringing the garden bell, appear similarly unique or particular. Their separate, distinctive nature might seem to share qualities with the "bridges thrown here and there across the stream"— aloof from "the water that flows under their arches"— which Bergson uses in *Creative Evolution* as a metaphor

---

20   Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 5, 85-6.
21   Ibid., 194-195.
22   Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), I, 51.

for the intellect's interruption of the continuous flow of thought and experience.[23]

Proust, moreover, not only discusses memory with as much directness as Woolf, but sometimes seems equally sceptical of Bergsonian ideas about the indivisible continuity of the inner life. When Marcel reflects on how other individuals "enter into us ... [as] a product of memory," he concludes that each "moment ... recorded" exists as "a single photograph."[24] Such photographs eventually accumulate only into "a collection of moments" or "a succession of momentary flashes"—a "disintegration" which "multiplies" not only the person recalled. It also, Marcel considers, multiplies the self. "I was not one man only," he remarks when remembering Albertine, "but as it were the march-past of a composite army."[25] No-one, he also reflects, ever experiences love or jealousy as "a single, continuous and indivisible passion." Instead, these emotions are "composed of an infinity of successive loves, of different jealousies, each of which is ephemeral, although by their uninterrupted multiplicity they give us the impression of continuity, the illusion of unity."[26]

Towards the end of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel remarks—like Bergson—that "nothing is further from what we have really perceived than the vision that the cinematograph represents."[27] Yet those conclusions about "uninterrupted multiplicity" and its "impression of continuity" suggest, on the contrary, that the mechanism of cinematography seems to Proust—or at any rate to his narrator Marcel—to offer an apt metaphor for the experience of life, emotion and memory. Among other contemporary writers, this assumption is clearly shared, and

23   Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 357.
24   Proust, *Remembrance*, III, 487.
25   Ibid., III, 487, 499.
26   Ibid., I, 404.
27   Ibid., III, 917.

figures much more prominently, in the work of Wyndham Lewis. *Time and Western Man* mentions Lewis's idea of a "domestic cinematograph ... the mechanical photographic reality ... that sense of things laid out side by side, of the unreality of time, and yet of its paramount importance."[28] This idea of "a domestic cinematograph" sums up strategies employed throughout the novel Lewis published a decade earlier, *Tarr* (1918). Their effects are immediately apparent in the novel's striking opening paragraphs:

> Paris hints of sacrifice.=But here we deal with that large dusty facet known to indulgent and congruous kind ... Inconceivably generous and naïve faces haunt the Knackfus Quarter.=We are not however in a Selim or Vitagraph camp (though "guns" tap rhythmically the buttocks).= Art is being studied.=Art is the smell of oil paint.[29]

Lewis's invention of the curious, emphatic punctuation mark ".=" sharply separates his sentences, framing each and the image it offers as a discrete, separate unit. Much as *Time and Western Man* suggests, this innovative prose style does lay things out side by side, offering only loosely connected static images; a "collections of moments."

Lewis probably began writing *Tarr* as early as 1909, and might have found in the mechanics of the recently-invented cinematograph—like Bergson in 1902, though with very different implications—a convenient paradigm for some of his ideas and practices. References to Selim and Vitagraph in these cryptic opening paragraphs help to suggest this. Selig and Vitagraph were early, pioneering cinema production companies: when Lewis

---

28   Lewis, *Time*, 266.
29   Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr: the 1918 Version*, edited by Paul O'Keeffe (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1990), 21.

revised *Tarr* into its more conventional 1928 version, he referred more straightforwardly to "Hollywood camps of pseudo cow-punchers," ensuring that some sense of the cinematic was retained.[30] Even without these direct references, Lewis's prose style and its framing of individual images establish, on their own, a strong resemblance to the "restless, jerky fluctuation of appearing and disappearing" Thomas Mann describes in the early cinema. Lewis's tactics in *Tarr* are also cinematic in being highly visual, extending the protagonist's professed dislike for any "ego ... imagined for the *inside* of it" by describing appearance and behaviour rather than the inner life of characters.[31] This external observation and Lewis's heavily-punctuated prose could hardly be more completely opposed to James Joyce's tactics, at the end of *Ulysses* (1922), in presenting the unbroken flood of Molly innermost thoughts. In this way, *Tarr* develops a thoroughgoing rejection of Bergsonian emphases on the durational fluidity of interior life, and of modernist streams of consciousness supposedly sharing these priorities.

Where Wyndham Lewis is concerned, this is of course no surprise. Lewis was a strident adversary of Bergson for much of his career, and an "Enemy," as he called himself, of modernist writing—of its fluidities and streams of consciousness in particular—throughout the 1920s and beyond. A valuable aspect of his work, in fact, derives from the comprehensiveness of these antipathies and the extent to which Lewis can be seen as an *anti*-modernist. Lewis's criticism and fiction—in *The Childermass* (1928) as well as *Tarr* and *Time and Western Man*—provide inverted mirror-images, or photographic negatives, highlighting through antithesis the artistic principles usually supposed definitive of modernist imagination.

---

30   Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr* (rev. ed.), (1928; London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), 9.
31   Lewis, *Time*, 299-300.

Finding these artistic principles apparently transgressed in the work of Proust and Woolf, as suggested above, might seem harder to explain. Difficulties might be compounded by evidence from elsewhere in the modernist movement—Imagist poetry's preference for "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," as Ezra Pound describes it, obviously further valorising stasis and the moment.[32] Questions might arise about the reliability of long-standing critical assumptions regarding modernism's stream-of-consciousness tactics, or about its replacement of "shredding and slicing" clocks with the durational "time in the mind" Woolf mentions in *Orlando*.[33] Have the Bergsonian aspects of modernist writing been over-emphasised, at least in the case of some authors, as Ann Banfield suggests in discussing Woolf? Should the judgements of other sceptical commentators be further acknowledged—such as Adam Barrow's outspoken claim that modernism's alternative, interior temporalities have been critically over-estimated?

No, there is not much reason to think so. Better use can be made of evidence outlined above. One way of doing so is through recognising that modernism's valorisations of the moment usually extend, rather than negating, its resistance to a mechanised age and its reductive temporalities. That momentary vision in *To the Lighthouse*—of "a pool at evening far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly"—exemplifies in one way how far the pace of modern travel threatened to fragment experience, as Woolf describes in *Orlando*. Yet the inviolate instantaneity with which the "far distant" is apprehended, Woolf suggests, also fleetingly encapsulates "the shape of loveliness itself." Edward Thomas likewise celebrates in "Adlestrop" the loveliness of things momentarily "seen from a train

---

32   Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry*, I:6 (March 1913), 200.
33   Woolf, *Orlando*, 69.

window," or remembered from this context—as much
through his poem's imitative form as its account of an
unscheduled stop at a sunny country station. Abbreviated
opening phrases—"Yes. I remember Adlestrop"—repro-
duce the suddenness with which the poet finds himself
recalling this summery episode. The enjambed third and
fourth lines imitate the way "the express train drew up
there/Unwontedly." Short sentences that follow, enigmatic
and disconnected in subject matter, likewise replicate rec-
ollection of random perceptions originating in "that min-
ute" of the train's unexpected halt. In form and subject,
Adlestrop dramatises a uniquely momentary experience—
one recalling an unforgettably particular encounter with
nature and sunny landscape. "Meadowsweet, and hay-
cocks dry," "high cloudlets" and whole shires of birdsong
are focused all the more intensely in consequence of the
brevity with which they were originally envisaged.[34]

In *Women in Love* (1921), D. H. Lawrence describes
another scene viewed from a passing train as a "vision
isolated in eternity."[35] Such visions can offer their own al-
ternatives to "the time which our clocks divide into equal
proportions," or to the problem identified in *À la recherche
du temps perdu*: that "since railways came into existence,
the necessity of not missing trains has taught us to take
account of minutes."[36] Thomas's account of "that min-
ute" in "Adlestrop", or the vanishing vision described in
To the Lighthouse, suggest that new awareness of single
minutes, or moments, offers more than only stress or frac-
ture. Experiences "isolated in eternity"—or "plucked out
of eternity," to borrow Bergson's phraseology in *Creative*

---

34   Edward Thomas, "Adlestrop", *Edward Thomas:
The Annotated Collected Poems*, edited by Edna Longley
(Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2008), 51.
35   D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (1921; Harmondsworth:
Penguin, 1971), 124.
36   Proust, *Remembrance*, II, 853.

Evolution—are in their own way "screened from the laws of time."[37] Bergson's views of memory clarify this potential, and the real nature of the illuminating momentary experiences described by Proust, Virginia Woolf or Edward Thomas. In the latter's description of Adlestrop, what illumines the moment is not so much its isolation as its connectedness, emphasised—from that opening "Yes. I remember ..."—by the poem's careful dramatisation of the processes of memory. Marcel's rediscovery of the landscape of his childhood, instantly springing into bloom from the taste of his madeleine, likewise appears unique not primarily in itself. The moment's uniqueness is shaped and empowered, instead, principally through its revelation, in Bergson's terms, that "our most distant past clings to our present and forms with it one and the same process of uninterrupted change." For Bergson, a crucial component of "the continuity of the inner life" is provided by this "conservation of the past" through memory—its intuitive, unpredictable and often involuntary operations swamping any bridges intellect or logic may seek to impose upon the stream of life.[38]

This continuity shapes narrative strategies throughout modernist literature. Repeated, extravagant analepses, dramatising Marcel's memories, help Proust consummate his resistance to "the mighty dimension of Time" in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.[39] In Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), repeated excursions into memory allow Clarissa to escape the "well of tears" troubling London after the Great War, and the "leaden circles" repeatedly inflicted upon the city by the booming chimes of Big Ben.[40] Transitions from present thought into memory exemplify, in each case, the seamless interfusion of past and present Bergson attributes

---

37   Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 332.
38   Bergson, *La perception du changement*, 31.
39   Proust, *Remembrance*, III, 1087.
40   Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 12, 6, etc.

to the inner life. Woolf highlights the effortlessness of
this interconnection as early as the second paragraph of
Mrs Dalloway, describing Clarissa recalling the "little
squeak of the hinges" when she opened French windows
in a country house visited decades in the past.[41] That "little
squeak" functions almost as a metatextual joke. Typically
of modernist tactics, from its opening page *Mrs Dalloway*
uses a character's memories to open up a route into the
past "as if a door had opened"—doing so smoothly enough
to make the transition, the hinge between episodes, almost
imperceptible.

In their fiction and commentary, modernist writers of-
ten indicate more directly how readily individual moments
or episodes are absorbed within the continuous inner life
of consciousness and memory. Towards the end of *To the
Lighthouse*, James is described as searching "among the
infinite series of impressions which time had laid down
leaf upon leaf, fold upon fold, softly, incessantly upon his
brain."[42] However crystalline or transfixed the moments
James experiences—however profoundly they are shown
affecting him in the novel's first part—their infinite soft
enfoldings suggest something eventually closer to leaf-
mould than leaf. They also recall views his mother, Mrs
Ramsay, takes of "little separate incidents which one
lived one by one" but which she then thinks of—almost
in a wave-particle duality of her own—as "curled and
whole like a wave."[43] Woolf follows a comparable train
of thought in her diary, a year or so after completing *To
the Lighthouse*, when wondering about the nature of
"this moment I stand on" and whether life is "very solid
or shifting." It appears to her that the moment "has gone
on for ever, will last for ever; goes down to the bottom
of the world," yet it also seems to her "transitory, flying,

---

41   Ibid., 5.
42   Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*,192.
43   Ibid., 55.

diaphanous ... like a cloud on the waves." She reflects that "it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, so quick, yet we are somehow successive and continuous we human beings."[44]

Woolf reflects further on antinomies between succession and continuity in "Modern Fiction" (1925). Her essay acknowledges the "myriad" nature of the impressions the mind receives, yet also emphasises how this "incessant shower of innumerable atoms" shapes itself, within inner life and consciousness, into something whole and unfractured. "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged," "Modern Fiction" remarks, "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."[45] That strange, rather anachronistic image of gig lamps might have been derived from another work exploring conflicts between stasis and continuity: her friend T.S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." Street-lamps in Eliot's poem provide a series of sharply distinguished moments—orderly, successive, and each attached to a precisely-recorded time of night. In the spaces between them, palely illumined only by the moon, precise divisions of temporality and the waking world dissolve vaguely towards darkness, memory, and dream. Around the time he wrote "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," in Paris in 1910, Eliot was attending another set of Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France. Though he was later to think differently, in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" Eliot seems on the whole to share Bergson's preference for the continuities of memory and the inner life, along with his resistance to time which "clocks divide into equal proportions."

---

44   Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (1953; London: Triad, 1985), 140.
45   Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, *1925-1928*, edited by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 160.

Along with the examples of Woolf's writing mentioned above, "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" at any rate confirms how extensively modernist vision was preoccupied by contrasts between unity and fragmentation, continuity and succession. Antinomies of this kind are obviously trans-historic—representing categories fundamental in the experience of any age—but the accelerating pace of transport and technology inscribed them particularly sharply within the life and imagination of the early twentieth century. Questioning the nature of this inscription and the relative importance of the categories involved may qualify and improve long-established critical conclusions about modernist literature. As Ann Banfield suggests, easy-going assumptions about the prevalence in Woolf's writing of stream-of-consciousness tactics—or of priorities attributed to Bergson—may obscure the particular role of intense momentary experiences and impressions in her imagination. On the other hand, critical emphases on the centrality of inner life and durational temporality in modernist writing remain long-standing simply because they are so obviously and generally valid. Experience "chopped into small sections, fleeting, accelerated ... restless" was widely characteristic of the modern age, while much of the character of modernist literature derives from its determination to assimilate this experience into forms of unity and wholeness. In response to the splintered perceptions and divided selves forced upon her by motor travel, Woolf remarks in "Evening over Sussex" that "we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self."[46] That conclusion, confirmed by experiences in the summer of 1927, continues to offer a valid summary of much of the endeavour of modernist writing.

46   Woolf, "Evening over Sussex," 455.

Part II

Recasting Chronology, Temporalities Out Of Joint

Mimmo Cangiano

MODERNISM AND THE DISRUPTION OF HISTORY. THE ITALIAN EXAMPLE

In August 1907, the future anti-fascist leader Giovanni Amendola published an article in the modernist journal *Prose*, in which he declared: "Our age has recognised the uncontrolled freedom of the particular."[1] Evoking the metaphor of Prometheus, who dies at the moment of his liberation, the neo-Kantian Amendola identifies a moral degeneration that he places in the context of Nietzschean philosophy. Amendola singles out the degeneration of an Ego which, having become the creator of its own law upon the "death of God," renounces that very law and declares the arbitrariness of its own beliefs and rational constructions. For Amendola, "this Ego is not Prometheus: it is Proteus," who thus becomes a dominant figure, an evil deity who attempts to create an indissoluble link between immanence and contingency. In the name of the rights of the particular (everything that opposes universal axioms and concepts), this link proclaims the end of the connection between life and any possibility of shared values, of every super-personal truth.

His essay "Né ideale né reale" had been published in the journal *Leonardo* the previous year and acknowledged a new philosophical horizon in the context of early Italian

---

1   Giovanni Amendola, *L'impotenza del pensiero* ("Prose," I, 4, June-July 1907), 226-231. Unless otherwise noted, all the English translations are mine. On the progressive advancement of the "particular," meaning on the progressive cultural attack on universal principles, cf. Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

modernism, which for him was tantamount to epistemological degeneration, as expressed in the new "philosophies of crisis" (Henry Bergson, Willian James, Ernst Mach, etc.):

> Our age can be called the age of the destruction of idols. […] Now the critique addresses those abstractions that until yesterday were hegemonic: scientific laws, moral imperatives, universal principles […]. The subjective and objective dogmatic beliefs of reality are suppressed […]. At the start of the road, we find Locke, Hume, Berkeley, […] at the end James, Schiller, Bergson, Le Roy, Mach… […]. Saying *I believe* and then adding that beliefs mirror only our intimate nature means saying, with lack of clarity, "I do not believe."[2]

In 1911, the Florentine writer Aldo Palazzeschi published his novel *Perelà's Code*. It is the story of a man made of smoke and of the other characters' futile attempts to define this smoke. Since Perelà has no form, the others see whatever they like in the smoke: the Bishop sees the sublimation of flesh in spirit, the banker the eternal movement of money, and so on. Palazzeschi's novel is the first European attempt to create a *mimesis* of reality entirely experienced in a state of contingency. Perelà came to represent Heidegger's definition of the "vaporisation of Foundations," the contemporary crisis of Ego (an individual made of smoke is one without a fixed identity) and of objective reality. This is the break between form and meaning, between sign and substance. It is an attack on any objectivity unwilling to accept its own transitoriness, the resulting crisis of the classical Cartesian notion of Subject, and of language: the instrument meant to

---

2   Giovanni Amendola, *Né ideale né reale*, in Delia Castelnuovo Frigessi (ed.), *La cultura italiana del '900 attraverso le riviste*, vol. I (Torino: Einaudi, 1960), 318-320.

express—in stable form—the subject and its relationship with reality.[3]

Yet, the principle of the perpetual motion of everything contained in reality—a principle traditionally considered one and the same as our entry into twentieth-century modernity—conceals the static nature of a formal logic. I believe that this static nature is embedded in modernist perspectives and lies at the core of the modernist disruption of history.

Franco Moretti wrote:

> leftist readings of modernist literature are more and more distinctly based on interpretative theories— Russian Formalism, the works of Bakhtin, the theories of "open" works, deconstructionism—that in one way or another are themselves part of Modernism. This sudden loss of a conceptual distance usually results in endless vicious cycles arising from the act of interpretation: this is exactly what happened in our case, so that a critique that was intended to criticize—or even demystify, imagine that!—has turned into a loquacious apologetics.[4]

To avoid these apologetics or interpreting modernism within a modernist framework, we should not view modernism as a mere battle of ideas; instead, we should identify the link between modernist topics and the historical, ideological, and social issues of the time, also underlining

---

3   On the relationship between modernist literature and the crisis of objectivity, cf. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2010) and J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2002).

4   Franco Moretti, *Segni e stili del moderno* (Torino: Einaudi, 1987), 235.

the connections between modernist ideas and the particular historical-political conditions in each specific country. Giovanni Papini, for example, described nationalism as a barrier against abstract generalisation. Modernism's attack on universal ideas was an ideological tool to support nationalist purposes. The new Italian "philosophy of contingency," as it was called in Italy, became the crowbar with which to prise apart the universalistic certainties of science and philosophy; in politics, the equivalent was the rejection of the "difference" and the "particular" that would characterise democracy and socialism:

> egalitarian progressive politics ranks among the manifestations of the mathematical and metaphysical spirit. […] the tendency to generalise and universalise […], the love of equality and universality (which in politics is internationalism) and the hatred for all that is qualitative difference. A democrat is a man who seeks to abolish all differences between men: he seeks to abolish the spirit of possibility.[5]

Here, the rejection of universalistic thought, seen as a tool for reducing the different to the identical, modernistically attacks the unity created by conceptual thought as an arbitrary and fictional construction. It then nationalistically connects the homeland to the preservation of the "particular" under attack. Modernism cannot be understood as a mere epistemological theory or artistic phenomenon. Instead, it must be identified as the cultural logic of a specific historical moment.

In Italy, for many decades, we preferred not to use the word "modernism." That cultural production was instead labelled in many different ways, such as "spiritualist

---

5   Giovanni Papini, "La politica del due più due," ("Il Regno," January 1905), in *Politica e civiltà* (Milano: Mondadori, 1963), 184-186.

revolt" or "decadence." Some more militant critics used the Lukacsian word "irrationalism," but with no clear connection to the idea of modernism this was ambiguous, evoking a mysticism unrelated to the scattered consciousness and reality of the twentieth century. During those still mysterious months he spent in Amendola and Palazzeschi's Florence after Irma Seidler's suicide, we know that Lukács managed to pass his essay *Metaphysics of Tragedy* to Papini through Lajos Fülep. It was first due to be published in the journal *La Voce*, but circumstances delayed this until it appeared a year later in the German version of *Soul and Form*.[6]

Long before the term modernism became hegemonic, the Hungarian philosopher published two essays: *The Parting of the Ways* (1910) and *Aesthetic Culture* (1910). These clarify some of its characteristics and identify modernism as the artistic counterpart of a philosophical approach Lukács felt was taking over. He wrote:

> The center of aesthetic culture is: the mood [...]. The essence of mood is its accidental, non-analysable nature. Aesthetic culture [....] was born when objects ceased to exist; [...] when all that was permanent disappeared from life. It was born when life was stripped of all values, and it now values the products of moods, the products of fortuitous circumstances devoid of any necessary correlation with values. In a sense the unity of aesthetic culture does exist: as a lack of unity. Aesthetic culture has a central tenet: the peripheral nature of all things. This culture also has a symbol for everything: namely that nothing is symbolic.[7]

---

6   János Kelemen, *The Rationalism of György Lukács* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

7   György Lukács, "Aesthetic Culture," in *The Lukács Reader*, edited by Árpád Kadarkay (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 148.

Certainly, *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism did not make its fortune exalting contingent life. Lukács, not yet a Marxist, focused elsewhere, and was unaware that a Russian exile in Paris—Lenin—had noted something similar. Published in 1908, Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* made two important points. First, in his critique of Ernst Mach, Lenin seized upon the way bourgeois thinking used Nietzschean theory to interpret nihilism in the context of conventionalism. Second—since the book also targeted comrades such as Vladimir Bazarov, who held Mach's theories to be the "epistemology of Marxism"—he noted the increasing dominance of such theories, and how this confusion lay in a misguided mix of historicism and relativism, creating an historicism unable to consider itself in dialectical relation with praxis. In 1922, Lukács described the issue thus:

> by transforming philosophy into 'anthropology' he caused man to become frozen in a fixed objectivity and thus pushed both dialectics and history to one side. […] This dogmatism arises because the failure to make man dialectical is complemented by an equal failure to make reality dialectical. Hence relativism moves within an essentially static world. As it cannot become conscious of the immobility of the world and the rigidity of its own standpoint it inevitably reverts to the dogmatic position of those thinkers who likewise offered to explain the world from premises they did not consciously acknowledge and which, therefore, they adopted uncritically. […] The weakness and the half-heartedness of such 'daring thinkers' as Nietzsche […] is that their relativism only abolishes the absolute in appearance. […] For it represents the highest principle of thought attainable in an undialectical universe […] What these relativists are doing is to take the present philosophy of man with its social and historical limits and to allow these to

ossify into an 'eternal' limit […] Yet, in the moment in which, with the unification of theory and praxis, modification of reality becomes possible, the absolute and its relativist counterpart completed their historical role.[8]

For Lukács, the gradual erosion of the objectivistic assumptions that formed the basis of reality were not just a sign of deteriorating nineteenth-century bourgeois common sense or of waning traditional, transcendent, metaphysics: it was first and foremost the outcome of the formal logic of nihilism. Lukács held that in "contradiction," modernist thinkers identified the only real, true character of Nature. Lukács went on to name this character, the idea of an eternal contradiction between life and our conceptual constructs (Life vs. Form; living vs. rigid, etc.), the theoretical bust of the nihilist perspective. This bust, not seeing itself in a dialectical relationship with what was happening on the level of praxis or of history, was therefore the formal and falsely objective logic of nihilism itself, something falsely 'eternal' just like the old metaphysics. Yet in this perspective (reified in the widespread metaphor of the *flow*—just think of Bergson) all things would reveal their fictional nature, including the subject, and of course political ideals or ideologies.

The ideological implications of this perspective emerged clearly in the critical and theoretical assumptions of the writer, art critic, and future ardent fascist Ardengo Soffici. He wrote:

In order to live, men have always needed to lean on something stable. Some have leaned on God, others on Reason, others on the idea of social duty. As for me, I've kicked away every foundation, and am hanging on a spider's thread suspended over a dark abyss. […] And

---

8   György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 186-189.

> I am happy. Being and not-Being have disappeared in Becoming, like a rapacious flow of joy that is named Life: an aimless flowing, that keeps on going, heedless of all the barriers we put up with our morality.[9]

Thomas Mann wrote that after Nietzsche, "Life" became the key concept in every interpretation of the world. And for Soffici, life meant precisely the lack of any stable foundations, or in his words "the aristocratic acceptance of the world […]; gay science of a man healed of the disease of transcendence."[10] Starting with his article on Cézanne in 1908, Soffici prepared the ground for the introduction of the Impressionists in Italy. He began to sketch a modernism that viewed the Impressionists as the last link in a cultural chain originating in the late eighteenth century, which was intended to deconstruct the aesthetic norms and hierarchies that had attempted to replace reality with its schematic symbolisation:

> Impressionism, […] the result of a genuine spiritual revolution that started with philosophy and simultaneously passed into the fields of science and art. […] One need only look with some insight at the work of an Impressionist painter to immediately realise that its main feature is not establishing a hierarchy of beings and things according to certain idealistic intellectual and even ethical principles, […] but rather placing every natural phenomenon on the same level; the legitimation and poetification of every manifestation of life.[11]

---

9   Ardengo Soffici, "Arlecchino," in *Opere*, vol. II (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1959), 326-328.

10   Ardengo Soffici, "Primi principi di un'estetica futurista," in *Opere*, vol. I (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1959), 709-711.

11   Ardengo Soffici, "Cubismo e futurismo," in *Opere*, vol. I (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1959), 617-618.

The contingentist assumption is here linked to an image of Life that, following Bergson, breaks open the gates of the intellectual constructs that try to lock it inside the 'forms' of the mind. In the work of the Impressionists (as Soffici learned from Jules Laforgue's *Melange Posthumes*), the reproduction of nature in the fluidity of luminous vibrations becomes the instance of a cognitive disjointedness that reformulates reality in the equalising light of subjective sensation, communicating the transience of appearance and "surface." The pliability of plastic volumes, their continuous, unstable intersecting in shimmering light, becomes the correlative of volatilising reality, of the impossibility of grasping objective reality. Naturally, history would become one of these dangerous attempts to freeze reality within the rigid limits of intellectual schematisation. As is typical in the modernist perspective, Soffici cannot help but reveal how the new epistemological approach, supposedly intended to destroy every form of universality, is actually becoming a new, and incredibly powerful, anthropological (everlasting) scheme. What was a historical reality, the psychological reifications of an historical condition, is turning into a *condition humaine.* The apparently progressive function manifests itself as an attack against the reification of nineteenth-century bourgeois common sense and is reduced to the absolutisation of the epistemological/anthropological perspective.

One interesting case is that of the cultural organiser and philosopher Giuseppe Prezzolini, since extolling the view of life as non-recomposable flow is directly connected (as with Papini) to the emergence of Italian nationalism. In 1902, while in France, Prezzolini read the work of a number of authors, whom he defined in November of the same year as "contingentists." Then, in a letter to Moisé Cecconi, Prezzolini began to outline a peculiar "idealism" (as he calls it) that addressed the similarities between Bergson's intuitionism, James' pragmatism, and the conventionalist

epistemology of Ernst Mach, Henri Poincaré and Gaston Milhaud:

> Philosophy is essentially theory of knowledge, epistemology. [...] I believe that Bergson [...] will be seen as the great renovator of contemporary psychology, if James does not run him off [...]. There is also a more scientific trend that analyses mathematics and physics, showing [...] the contingency of scientific laws: [...] showing metaphysics as the actual foundation of every science.[12]

Young Prezzolini's "idealism" corresponds to the progressive emergence in Italy of a modernist *modus cogitandi* whose aim included the dissolution of Hegelianism, the negation of every possible objectivity, every conceptual foundation, by twisting Hegelian dialectics (the intrinsic dynamic of opposites) in a subjectivist-pragmatist direction. Prezzolini defends a "becoming" (against any Being) that extolls contradiction as a permanent epistemological status, linking truths to the consciousness of the subject and to the psychological oscillations of this consciousness. The possibility of objective truth is eliminated, since every truth is related to the psychological status of the philosopher or scientist. Every universal idea, and every scientific law, is therefore only the intellectual expression of that psychological status and will be pushed aside by the new epistemology.

Inevitably, the idea of History also becomes the individual expression of the historian's psychology, something created by the mobile (therefore not universal) subject's

---

12   Giuseppe Prezzolini, letter to Moisé Cecconi, November 1902, in Andrea Cecconi, *Thomas Neal. Filosofo, critico d'arte e collezionista* (Firenze: Nerbini, 2015), 40-41.

psychology: "History is an artistic creation."[13] Prezzolini, a reader of Max Stirner, defines "idealism" as a radical subjectivism that targets the "flux" of inner life (where any objectivistic calcification is impossible) as the place to find a new culture and a new intellectual model: "A new generation is coming, a generation for whom the inner world is more real that the external one. [...] It is a new stage of human life. [...] We usually believe that things have a value in themselves, while they have the value we give them."[14]

He insists further:

> We could call this approach the philosophy of life. This philosophy teaches us that under the hard crust of our concepts, there is a torrent of liquid lava [...] where life flows [...], a harmony that we, breaking with logic, abandoning the practical metaphysics of common sense [...] and despising science as incapable of giving us the truth, can reach [...]. This philosophy proclaims real life, [...] hidden and deep this life consists of the incredible spectacle of the eternal and tumultuous flow of the I [...]. Through this philosophy thought leaves behind every law and wanders in the freedom of contingency. [...] a continuous becoming with no beginning and with no end.[15]

Prezzolini reduces every philosophical system to the individual (and psychological) needs of the philosopher, and in this way reveals the contingent value of philosophy itself: "How could thought have a system, a cage, a tomb?

---

13   Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Diario per Dolores* (Milano: Rusconi, 1993), 75.

14   Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Il sarto spirituale* (Torino: Persico, 1906), XXV.

15   Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Vita trionfante (Ad Angelo Conti)," in *La cultura italiana del '900 attraverso le riviste*, vol. I, (cit.), 98-99.

[...] how, if the entire story of the philosophy of a man is as individual as his own clothes?"[16] Prezzolini's "idealism" is therefore a tendentially solipsistic philosophy, intended to stress the impossible generalisation on a universal level of the individuality represented by an individual. The epistemological-subjectivist presupposition rejects any attempt to anchor objective reality, reducing every intellectual approach to the personal expression of a movable psychological condition. In this kind of philosophy "there is nothing solid; the only solid thing is actually the critical machine that disaggregates, melts, dissolves. When one tries to build something, to fix something, everything becomes fluid and smoky"[17] (just like Palazzeschi's "man of smoke").

Prezzolini rejects any possibility of grasping objective reality, and not only in the fields of science (as the decadents continued to), but also in art, religion, and obviously philosophy. Of course, the only philosophy that can reveal the truth about the lack of any truth is that of contingency, which is presented as a possible (although negative) objectivity. Overturning the classical hierarchy between subject and reality, all knowledge is reduced to pseudo-objectivity, to what Ernst Mach calls "economy of thought" or "element." Then, through authors such as James and Bergson, these presuppositions went beyond scientific epistemology, presenting the continuous failure of the conceptual process as the ultimate stage of epistemology, and as an inevitable and general characteristic of human existence (not simply of a historical phase of it). The immobilisation of historical progress (a necessity for bourgeois thought, pitted against the emergence of the proletariat and its

---

16   Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Un compagno di scavi. F. C. S. Schiller*," La cultura italiana del '900 attraverso le riviste*, vol. I, (cit.), 156.

17   Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Spunti e sistema: il Bergson," in *Uomini 22 e città 3* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1964), 49.

materialist ideology) no longer comes from the exaltation of immutable and absolute values, but relies on the presupposition of a continuous becoming—an unstoppable and relentless mobility—which, however, excludes any forward movement. It does not exclude it, obviously, on the level of actual progress: science, for example, must advance because it is necessary for production. Instead, it excludes it on the generalised level of philosophical theory, where the intellectual regains a prestigious position, becoming the custodian and revealer of the new epistemology, and turning the sceptical presuppositions of this epistemology into a general (and universal) law: Lukács' "theoretical bust."

This law degrades every conceptual progress to appearance, illusion, or metaphysics, and reduces all social movements that follow different epistemological models (for example, materialism) to outdated defenders of thought systems that modern epistemology has already revealed to be fake:

> The idea of becoming in logic shows us the need to produce broader and more elastic conceptions, more apt for expressing the variability of thought and things; and from unique and absolute truth, we moved to subjective truths, ever-changing and transient. [...] If one accepts some postulates and rules, he will obtain some certain truths, yet the truths one obtains from certain postulates will be false according to other postulates and rules.[18]

The cognitive point of view has a validity that is purely utilitarian. Actually, the only point of view that is not merely utilitarian is precisely the one that investigates the functional-utilitarian nature of every point of view.

---

18 Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Piani di conoscenza," in Giovanni Papini, Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Carteggio*, vol. I, (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003), 739-740.

Prezzolini considers the latter to be part of ancient sophistic rationality, later used in modern times by thinkers such as Stirner and Nietzsche:

> Sophistry [...] was the ultimate form of rational activity. The Sophist is not a philosopher; he is a man enamoured of every form of philosophy. The Philosopher is a man reduced to a single system, actually to a single idea [...]. The Sophist knows that absolute value does not exist; that one thing is not more real, or more certain, or more valuable than another. [...] Stirner [...] Nietzsche [...], they have been fed by sophistic thought.[19]

Finally, the separation between those who understand the fictional and utilitarian nature of all points of view and those who do not is quickly traced back to a philosophical-political perspective that reduced materialism, positivism, and socialism to a "level of knowledge" suitable only for the masses, but definitely not for the intellectual:

> We do not have to be unfair to our opponents; we have to recognise that their theory is true, if not for us, for the masses. At their level determinism is true, historical materialism is beautiful, the common ethics is good, and religion is necessary.[20]

The development of modernist epistemology, the critique of historical materialism, and the extolling of a bourgeois and nationalistic revolt against the ideas of the nineteenth century are not one and the same because they are all part of some outdated form of ultramontane and feudal mysticism: they are all part of the new philosophical and existential perspective based on the exaltation of

---

19   Ibid., 744.
20   Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Vita intima," in *Faville di un ribelle* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2008), 66.

the "particular." For Papini and Prezzolini, the new "philosophy of contingency" (apparently a progressive one in its critical march against any objectivity or solid value) was a means of supporting extreme right-wing political proposals.

In 1903, Prezzolini began to work with the nationalist journal *Il Regno*, headed by Enrico Corradini. He removed all references to the theoretical models of foreign nationalism (Barrès and Kipling) and anchored the newspaper in the "theory of the élites" developed by Vilfredo Pareto. For Prezzolini, Pareto's theories were not merely important at a political level, in which class struggle—reduced to the traditional alternation of élites—could be interpreted as a simple conflict between bourgeois ideologists and socialist demagogues. Pareto's theories, according to which ideology functions as a call to action, also have a fundamental value at the epistemological level, because political rationality is presented as a rationalization *a posteriori* of actions that are not completely logical and, as usual, follow individual and subjective needs. Prezzolini sees in Pareto the theoretician of potential bourgeois action, since he considers Pareto to be the philosopher who has transposed the epistemological ideas of the philosophy of contingency and of Mach and Poincaré's Empirio-criticism from the scientific to the political plane.

Naturally, this new form of political struggle, in which two different élites give a theoretical and ideological form to their individual needs, will be won by those who are already aware of the fictional nature of those ideological forms, not by those (the socialists, among others) who have not understood that ideologies are simply a rational cover for the intellectual justification of psychological impulses and needs. Only those who have understood this fictional nature will truly be able to make these impulses and needs a reality.

The radical subjectivation of historical (and scientific) laws reduces history to a struggle between individuals whose ideologies are simply the expression of their individual wills. Any shared value or action is, in this sense, impossible. Instead of the by now problematic and absolutist ultramontane perspectives, during the imperialist stage of capitalism the bourgeois intellectual opted for the immobilisation of historical progress. However, this immobilisation was no longer based on the exaltation of immutable values but relied precisely on the epistemology which rendered these values impossible. He thus created an ideology where historical progress was void of any meaning, because every ideology—and every historiography (also an ideology, of course)—was nothing more than the reflex of the individual (atomised) psychology of a subject.

Let us conclude with Luigi Pirandello, a sure champion of Italian modernism:

> A humorist might picture Prometheus in the act of sadly contemplating his torch, seeing in it the fatal cause of his torment. He has finally realized that Jupiter is no more than an illusory ghost of himself, the shadow of his own body cast by the torch he holds in hand. There is only one way to make Jupiter disappear, and that is by Prometheus extinguishing his torch. But he knows not, wants not, cannot; so the shadow remains, fearsome and tyrannical, for all the men who fail to see through the fatal deception.[21]

---

21   Luigi Pirandello, *On Humor* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 141. On Pirandello and modernism, cf. Michael Subialka, "Modernism at War: Pirandello and the Crisis of (German) Cultural Identity," in *Annali d'Italianistica*, 2015, 75-97; and Bradford A. Masoni's recent book, *Pirandello Proto-Modernist* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019).

We are dealing here with an ontologisation of the modernist historical and philosophical *crisis*, transferred onto the image of a primordial Chaos (before the "torch"). That chaos has now become the origin to return to, by denouncing all reason capable of creating forms or of mortifying the flow of life into well-defined constructions: where life is painful only because of the fragile constructions of reason with which mankind attempts to oppose nature.[22] However, it is not Prometheus but Proteus, as Amendola had warned. Because in such a perspective the psychological reifications of a specific time in history become the true (and eternal) reality of the world.

In fact, one can see that Pirandello's *On Humor*, doubtlessly the most important theoretical embodiment of Italian modernism, is based on an ideological contradiction: the transition from the historical evolution of humour itself to its final transformation into an ahistorical element, an anthropological component of human existence. According to Pirandello, humour (the ability to always see the other side of things, the ability to avoid generalising and universal propositions or systems) has always existed. But its centuries-old existence does not cancel out history's capacity to change and transform. Compared to the past, Pirandello wrote, people have become more apt to understand *humour*, and therefore have changed: human nature does not appear to be ontological, but rather determined by history.

It is here that the concept passes from art to life. Thus, not only works of art but all of our ideal constructions, even those we make in everyday life, conceptualise abstractions: "Our knowledge of the world and of ourselves

---

22   Cf. Romano Luperini, *Pirandello* (Roma: Laterza, 2014), 51: "It could be argued that the consciousness of humour tries to recapture and almost mimic the mobility and unpredictability of life, taking on its fluid, contradictory perspective, and in so doing prevailing over the rigidity of forms."

totally lacks the objective value […]. This objective value of reality is a continuous illusory fabrication."[23]

Challenging the imitative abilities of realistic art leads to viewing humorous art as a construct that can mimic the flow of life, and then, exalting that flow, to a view that aims to preserve mankind from the pain of discovering the illusoriness of its ideal creations, of the creations that try to block that flow: "logic, by abstracting ideas from emotions, tends precisely to fix what is changeable and fluid. It tends to give an absolute value to what is relative, and thus it aggravates an ill which is already serious in itself since the prime root of our ills consists precisely in this feeling that we have of life."[24]

The consciousness of historical change described in the first part of the essay therefore becomes an ontological consciousness that ultimately excludes history itself, making it, too, one of those "ideal constructs" to be viewed with scepticism: "The humorist knows what a legend is and how it is created, what history is and how it is made: they are all compositions, more or less ideal; and the greater the pretense of reality, the more idealized they are. The humorist amuses himself by disassembling these compositions."[25] Here, in equating history to legend, a nodal point of modernist ideology emerges. This is exactly what Lukács called the "destruction of reason," whose fundamental goal, and I quote, was "the radical subjectivation of history."[26]

In Italy, modernism developed in the historical context of the "failed Risorgimento." This resurgence refers to the wars of unification fought across the peninsula until 1870. In fact, the perception of a "failed Risorgimento,"

---

23   Pirandello, *On Humor*, 152.
24   Ibid., 140.
25   Ibid., 143.
26   György Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1981), 117.

represents (as does, for example, the decline of the Habsburg Empire) the climax of the intellectual disenchantment that directly led to the "crisis of foundations," which modernism exploded altogether. Since about 1880s, Italian intellectuals depicted the country as in the hands of opposing power brokers. For them is evident, then, that the Risorgimento has failed, and that the new nation does not embody the long-cherished dream of the liberal patriots. For the Italian intellectual groups, the political crisis, which culminated in various cabinets led by Giovanni Giolitti, is transfigured into a cultural clash between idealism and empiricism, between the moral blackmail of the heroism of the Risorgimento and the prudent reformist politics of Giolitti himself. This loss of direction and fading sense of utopia led to all hope of authenticity being abandoned; it preserved only the image of a fragmentation that reflected the uselessness of any ideology. This was the central theme of *the* decisive Italian modernist novel: Pirandello's 1909 *The Old and the Young*. The novel describes the new epistemological condition and identifies the historical factors that led to the birth of modernist ideology and its effects on literature itself. *The Old and the Young* expresses this epistemological perspective of modernism in terms of "humour," and goes on to explore its relationship with the broader historical issues Pirandello observed in post-Risorgimento malcontent. Unlike other Italian modernist writers, such as Italo Svevo, in this novel Pirandello is not limited to explaining the new modernist *episteme*: he presents the historical conditions that, in Italy, led to the rise of that *episteme*.

In *The Old and the Young*, which recounts the Sicilian class struggles of 1893, Pirandello began to deconstruct the form-producing capacity of the external narrator, while simultaneously describing a political scenario with no communality of intent, composed only of subjective, individual, contingent, particular interests. Pirandello connected

the political and moral crisis of Italy's post-Unification years to the rise of a modernist way of thinking that declared, in the field of epistemology, the impossibility of shared truths and beliefs.[27] It in turn clarified the origin of this epistemology in the symptoms experienced by Italian subjects after the ideals of the Risorgimento faltered. The apparent realism in the narrative was subordinate to a swarm of intradiegetic impressions that greatly reduced the form-producing capacity of the external narrator. The tangle of impressions described by Pirandello swept away the supposed objectivity of the narration in a flood of opinions ("no facts, only interpretations"), and simultaneously reduced historical events to secondary factors that were mere reagents for the psychology of the characters.

Here again is the *humorous* strategy, where the foremost target is immobility, the fetish of the "given" that passes itself off as reality, and from which the humoristic perspective aims to identify another form of reality, changing and evolving, which new art, modernist art, must represent: "art, like all ideal or illusory constructions, also tend to fix life; the statue in a gesture, the landscape in a temporary immutable perspective. But—what about the perpetual mobility of successive perspectives? what about the constant flow in which souls are?"[28]

The figure Pirandello was implicitly evoking was the Nietzschean "wanderer," "he who finds delight in change

---

27   Cf. Frederic Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), 131: "a growing conviction of the gap between words and real meaning of real experience—arises from the increasing autonomy of culture in the middle-class world. It reflects the disintegration of the older codified social wisdom; a proliferation of private languages and private philosophies that is itself but the reflection of the increasing atomization of the private existence."

28   Pirandello, *On Humor*, 152.

and transitoriness."[29] This figure understands that any value system must fall, and reality must transform into a non-recomposable *flow* to allow Life to revolt against whatever seeks to fix it into definite forms.

With this narrative position, what first began to disintegrate was the unity of purpose of any specific "political" group that could have caused (historical) political change. Emblematically, in fact, all political sides represented in the novel (the supporters of the past regime; the liberals currently in power with the Historical Left; the socialists) are embodied by highly contrasting figures, underscoring the lack of unity and purpose that is integral to the lack of a common value system, to strong social bonds. Thus, in *The Old and the Young*, psychological fragmentation becomes the real protagonist of the novel. Each character has his own political goals, which vary because they arise from different *personal* motivations: individuals' particular interests have replaced a common shared program, psychological explanations have replaced socio-historical ones. The character's actions are presented as being driven by a psychological need (the subjectivation of history). However, the psychological structure of each character is not portrayed in dialectical relation to social transformation. Instead, it is presented as part of a human psyche that has always been identical to itself. In this way, History is simply the result of the struggle between the psychological and individual needs of each character. It is actually a false "movement" because it is determined by needs that are basically pre-historical, natural. The typical movements of the historical novel are subject to the full hegemony of modernist ideology, where the character's right to a "point of view" depreciates common values and leads to

---

29   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 204.

relativism, introducing a lack of cohesion which destroys any possible symbolic core typical of the historical novel.

In fact, as we said, Pirandello points out the historical causes that accompany the emergence of the modernist epistemological crisis in Italy, yet he also projects, *a posteriori*, its motifs onto previous forms of culture and society, and thus onto the previous stage of capitalism (ideologically, that of Realism; historically, in Italy, that of the Risorgimento), showing, surreptitiously, that nothing has changed and the new system is merely history repeating itself.

The structure of the historical novel turns out to be meaningless precisely because modernist ideology is incorporating the historical-realist perspective. Yet, what appears to be the abandonment of the world to the anarchy of the particular is actually, in the recomposed image of a natural "flow," the resumption of an epistemological judgment that claims to be universal and therefore eliminates History, judging anything that refuses to acquire the "disaggregating" characteristics of that very flow. The criticism of illusions is realised in the description of a Nature that is forever in motion, forever destroying the given, which mankind must strive to resemble to in order to avoid the pain of contradictory existence:

> One thing only is sad, my friends: to have understood the game! I mean the game played by that frolicsome devil whom each of us has inside him, and who diverts himself by representing to us outside ourselves, as reality, what, a moment later, he himself reveals to us as our own illusion, laughing at us for the efforts we have made to secure it.[30]

30   Luigi Pirandello, *The Old and the Young* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928), 468.

By proclaiming the inevitability of contradiction, Nature eliminates historical progression and requires man to adapt to its laws (as in the essay *On Humor*). In this sense, and this is one of the main purposes of the new cultural horizon, modernism cannot present itself as a cultural outcome of historical and material transformations. For this reason, modernism *projects* its topics onto previous cultural horizons, and rather presents itself as an epistemological and anthropological theory of knowledge that corresponds to the reality of a world that cannot be transformed. The very purpose of this is to eliminate History as a transformative force, replacing it with the immobile flow of Becoming;[31] the custodian of an immobility that exalts movement:

> Conclude! Of all the pressing needs that afflict humanity, this one is no doubt the saddest and vainest. […] the strongest recognition of not having concluded anything comes when […] we rise to contemplate and consider nature. […] Because nature, in its eternity, does not conclude. And we who live in it, we who are it, but who for a short time have seen and considered ourselves as separate and distinct parts, when the time comes to return in its eternity, recognise all our conclusions as vain, illusory, and arbitrary.[32]

---

31   Significantly, in the "Preface" to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello makes his noted distinction between "historical" writers and "philosophical" writers, the latter being interested not so much in the story as in its universal meaning.

32   Luigi Pirandello, "Non conclude," in Giancarlo Mazzacurati, *Pirandello nel romanzo europeo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), 356-357.

This corresponds with the bourgeois subject's claim to identify with life itself, seeing his hegemonic stage as… the end of History.

Louis Armand and David Vichnar

ROTATION REROTATION SUPRAROTATION: THE POLITICS OF PRAGUE DADA[1]

1. It is a frequently repeated assertion that Dada, like the Plague of 1348, passed the City of a Thousand Spires by—an assertion given credence by the few commentaries and ripostes published by such prominent practitioners and theorists of poetism as poets Vítězslav Nezval and Artur Černík, and critics Roman Jakobson and Karel Teige between the mid-1920s, and uncritically repeated by subsequent generations of art and literary historians like Karel Srp, Jindřich Toman and Pavlína Morganová. Yet the assertion is a highly doubtful one. In his 2007 article, "Dada in Bohemia and Moravia," Ludvík Kundera wrote: "The very title sounds doubtful: the Czech lands after WW1 were an island in the 'sea' of defeated countries. The end of WW1 brought us freedom, sovereignty, positive, well-nigh optimistic tendencies, whereas Germany was in the throes of chaos, negation running rampant, no perspectives, so the belief was that in Bohemia there was no matrix for Dada: the whole movement was dismissed on the basis of a very superficial view of its doubtful value."[2] Only during the 1960s, when Prague became

2   Ludvík Kundera, "Dada in Bohemia and Moravia" (2007): www.pwf.cz/rubriky/dalsi-projekty/dada-east/ludvik-kundera-dada-v-cechach-a-na-morave_3246.html. Unless stated otherwise, all translations from the Czech and German originals are the authors' own.

Fluxus-East HQ under the direction of Milan Knížák, did research into the city's Dada and "Ur-Dada" movements commence with any seriousness, although with the third wave of national revivalism after the Velvet Revolution, this too seems to have been consigned in turn to the "dustbin of history": Srp conspicuously makes no mention of Kundera in founding his assertion that "Only in the mid-1920s did Dadaism become the centre of attention," albeit in Brno, not Prague. "The only artist linked with the original Dadaism who had marked success in Prague," Srp insists, "was Kurt Schwitters" who "put on an evening of poetry in 1926."[3]

This view is directly contradicted in a 1965 article by the playwright and caricaturist Adolf Hoffmeister (a self-professed Dadaist and long-time friend of John Heartfield), who recounts with some authority the arrival in Prague in 1920 of the Dadaists Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader at the Old Crop Exchange on Senovážné náměstí—announced in the *Prager Tagblatt* of 25 February with an article by Hausmann entitled "What does Dada want in Europe?" Hoffmeister writes:

> Their 1 March performance looked ominous. The Czechs were anti-German. The Germans were anti-Bolshevik. The police were suspicious. […] With Baader having defected with half the manuscripts, the remaining two protagonists—one German and the other Czech-German from Vienna—had to improvise. "The Race between a typewriter and a sewing machine." Hausmann's "Sixty-One-Step." They played, they read, they shouted, they danced, whatever came to mind. The performance was a sweeping success. For the first time

---

3   Karel Srp, "Prague and Brno," *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avantgardes, 1910-1930*, eds. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 358.

ever Dadaists were accepted by an uninitiated audience with resounding applause. And it happened in Prague.[4]

This success was commemorated by Hausmann in his 1920 photomontage, *Dada Siegt* ("Dada Conquers," a.k.a. "A Bourgeois Precision Brain Incites a World Movement"), in which Hausmann himself is seen standing centre-right beside an easel displaying an image of Prague's Wenceslas Square. Huelsenbeck records the event in *En avant dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus*, published the same year by Paul Steegemann in Hanover:

> The newspapers launched a monstrous anti-dada propaganda a few weeks before our arrival in Prague. Still there were crowds in the streets, shouting rhythmically after us: da-da, da-da… The manifestation was to begin at 8 o'clock. Thousands of people thronged at the entrance… Baader disappeared… At 8:20 we got a letter from him… We had to start without him.[5]

The next day, Kundera reports, the Prague evening daily *Bohemia* ran a lengthy report entitled "Dada Scandal in Prague." Similar articles also appeared in *Národní demokracie* and *Národní politika*. For his part, Hausmann described the event as "problematic," writing in a 1965 letter to Kundera:

> At first, we visited a number of editor offices, but the social democrats threatened us with a beating since we're communists, and at the *Prager Tagblatt* they

---

4   Adolf Hoffmeister, *Čas se nevrací* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965), 196.

5   Qtd. in Miroslav Topinka *Hadí Kámen: Eseje, **články**, skici 1966-2006* (Brno: Host, 2007). Cf. Richard Huelsenbeck, *En avant dada: Geschichte der Dadaismus* (Hannover: Steegemann, 1921), 88.

were so kind as to pull out a revolver and menace us with using it against us as instigators. Shortly before our soirée Baader disappeared and, while looking for him, I found—in the cupboard beneath my clothes—a letter from him. He'd decided to return to Berlin and in order to screw up our show he'd taken all the manuscripts with him. The public, 1,200 people approx., were livid. Huelsenbeck and I together read a simultaneous poem improvised from two newspaper articles, talking complete gobbledygook. When the tumult became too much, Huelsenbeck announced I would now dance the "Sixty-One Step." Whenever the public was too outraged, I had to dance something in order to calm everyone down. In the end it was a sweeping success. The next evening we presented another show to a relatively calm audience, having meanwhile quickly written new texts. Then we went to Karlovy Vary, where the soirée got cancelled following threats of violence.[6]

All of these accounts give a different picture to the one painted by Srp and uncritically repeated—for example in Morganová's *History of Czech Action Art*—that "very rarely is there a link to Dadaism or Futurism, as is common in a western context. These avantgarde trends did not evoke much of a response in the Czech[oslovak] milieu… where there was very little room for Dadaist provocation and impertinence."[7] While Morganová notes (somewhat confusedly) that "in 1920 and 1922 two important productions of Swiss and German Dadaism were held in Prague," she nevertheless insists that "Dada in its original form" had no "repercussions."[8]

---

6   Kundera, "Dada in Bohemia and Moravia."
7   Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the iron Curtain* (Prague: Karolinum, 2015), 37-38.
8   Ibid., 38.

The activities of the Prague "Devětsil" group (founded in 1920), meanwhile, were at best ambivalent in their acknowledgement of Dada's influence, as evinced in the writings of its most prominent members Nezval and Teige, neither of whom demonstrated any great appreciation of Dada in any case (with the notable exception of Teige's "Dada Military Parade" article in *Pásmo*, December 1925). In part this may be attributed to the diffuse nature of the interwar scene in Prague, which also spans the irrealism of Kafka, the "science fiction" of Karel Čapek, the experimental poetics of Marina Tsvetaeva and the structuralism of Jakobson and René Wellek, among others. In part, this was also due to the political situation following the declaration of Czechoslovak independence in 1918, Pan-Slavonicism, and the orientations of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (which, in tandem with a degree of Francophilia, was a major catalyst for the strong reception of Surrealism in the mid-30s). With such proximity to such culture centres as Berlin, Hannover, and Zürich, there was an ingrained perception of Dada as a "German" product.

In any case, Srp and Morganová's nativist view of the inter-war Prague art scene misrepresents the internationalism both of Dada and the city itself. (It's not for nothing that Hoffmeister, like Walter Mehring, characterised Hausmann as a Viennese Czech poet.) As Tzara wrote in "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto" (1916): "Civilisation is still shit, but from now on we want to shit in different colours so as to adorn the zoo of art with all the flags of the consulates."[9]

2. Yet, for all the attempts at "Germanising" Dada, as a superficial and *foreign* influence—evoking the very

---

9   Tristan Tzara, "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto," *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, edited by Robert Motherwell (Cambridge, MA: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951), 73-97.

chauvinisms Dada was born in response to—this account
fails on its own terms. A tendency to nationalist chauvin-
ism and anxiety of influence cannot obscure the fact that
1920s Prague and Brno did spawn a significant, in some
cases even unique, "underground" Dada scene. Even less
does it mean that the cultural repressions undertaken in the
name of the poetist 1920s political orientations should be
brushed aside in subsequent, even contemporary, literary
history. For a closer look behind the official scenes and
beyond the usual suspects reveals that Prague had indeed
functioned, in Jed Rasula's more thoughtful account, if not
as "a bastion of Dada," then at least as its "incubator."[10]

The salient fact remains that Dada can be said to rep-
resent the first major avantgarde to emerge in Prague after
the foundation of Czechoslovakia, and the first dedicat-
ed Dada journal appeared in Prague the following year.
Entitled *Ruch*, it featured in its September 1919 issue a
Czech translation of Huelsenbeck's *Was ist Dadaismus?*
Teige himself acknowledged reading this text and also
contributed an article on photography to the following
issue (raising the question of how far Dada in fact pre-
determined the founding of Devětsil). *Ruch* was joined
by Červená Sedma cabaret's *Bulletin*, which in mid-1919
published Kurt Schwitters' Dada theatre manifesto, *To
All the Theatres in the World*, along with an excerpt from
"Ferenc Futurista's Dadaist poetry" and was soon aug-
mented by the tireless Dada propaganda of Aleksić and
Branko Ve Poljanski, who were both active in Prague
in 1921 organising Dada soirées (including one in April
of that year featuring Aleksić reading from a scroll he
claimed was twenty-five metres long),[11] and whose *Zenit,*

---

10   Jed Rasula, *Destruction Was My Beatrice: Dada and
the Unmaking of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic
Books, 2015), 270.

11   Rasula quotes accounts claiming that their events at-
tracted the participation of some 1,000 ecstatic spectators

Dada-Jok, Dada Tank and *Dada Jazz* magazines, while published in Zagreb, would include major statements of Prague Dada and "anti-dada."

Kundera, in examining what had so often been depicted as a series of brief incursions by Berlin Dadaists into an otherwise indifferent Prague environment, echoes testimonies by František Halas, Bedřich Václavek, Walter Serner, and other eyewitnesses, pointing to an existing Dada and Ur-Dada scene, contemporary with Dada's transition from Zürich to Paris and Berlin. Importantly, Kundera identifies the host of Baader, Huelsenbeck and Hausmann's first Prague visit (in February and March of 1920) as the local writer Melchior Vischer (born Emil Walter Kurt Fischer in Teplitz/Teplice, North-West Bohemia), who later that same year was to publish what was hailed in his correspondence with Francis Picabia and Tristan Tzara as the "first Dada novel" ("'insofar,' as Vischer himself wrote in a letter from January of that year, 'as one can still use the silly word "novel" at all'"),[12] *Sekunde durch Hirn* (*Second through Brain*).

(Rasula, *Destruction*, 270).

12   Qtd. in Vichnar, "Radiantly Splattered," introduction to Melchior Vischer, *Second Through Brain*, translated by Tim König and David Vichnar (London: Equus Press, 2015), 7.

Fig. 1. Melchior Vischer, *Sekunde durch Hirn* (Hannover: Steege-mann, 1920) / *Second through Brain* (London: Equus Press, 2015)

Sekunde durch Hirn—"a book," Kundera notes, to be "counted among ultradadaist texts"[13]—was published in

---

13   Its "narrative" consists of a series of disconnect-ed vignettes, flashing through the mind of one Jörg Schuh, a stuccoist in the process of falling off the scaffolding of a for-ty-storey construction site. Staring certain death in the eye, the protagonist embarks on a cab ride "on the great Milky Way" which takes him through his past life, both actual and also the many might-have-beens. Although the setting of Jörg's fall has no place name proper, most of the flashbacks do have a local habitation: his conception at a Central-European brothel and his birth aboard an Andalusian barge in the Lisbon harbour give rise to a highly erratic, if also very place-specific travelogue. Throughout, Jörg appears in different times, spaces, and imper-sonations: he witnesses his own conception, he experiences his prenatal life, his birth, his existence as a newborn, and an inter-minable series of further incarnations, then back to the falling

Hannover as part of Steegemann's well-known Silbergäule series (alongside works by Huelsenbeck, Schwitters and Serner), with a cover designed by Schwitters himself. It served as the focal point of Dragan Aleksić's "Dadaism" article, published in the April 1920 issue of *Zenit*, in which he examined the paradox of a "Dada novel": "A novel is a mistake… A novel is a long-winding tapeworm. A novel should be thrown about… A DADA-novel is an electrical radium rapid jolt. (Melchior Vischer Prague…)."[14] The article goes on to proclaim: "DADA is developing everywhere. DADA has representatives in Prague and their success spreads as fast as drum fire."[15]

Aleksić's article, like Jakobson and Teige's "Dada" essays of the same year, coincided with the arrival in Prague of none other than Tzara himself, who remained in the city until September. Vischer's correspondence with Tzara had begun in late 1918, with Vischer's polite letter of greetings apprising Tzara of his plan to start the first Dada journal in Prague. A year later (in January 1920) Vischer wrote again, this time with the manuscript of his "Merzroman" aka *Sekunde durch Hirn* (an allusion to Kurt Schwitters's "Merz" collages), inquiring if the Dada papa couldn't be

---

Jörg Schuh and, finally, a "brain radiantly splattered" against the pavement. This fantastic roller-coaster ride through the head, in turn, takes Jörg from Genoa, St. Gotthard, and Vienna, to "a thermal city in which Goethe had stayed temporarily" (i.e. Vischer's native Teplice) and onwards: to Lapland, Nagasaki, Notre Dame, "Caoutchoucstate, Africa," Shandong, the Moon, Prague, Madrid, Fiume, Budapest, Berlin, Brazil, Cape Horn, Chicago, and via London back to "the antiquated appetitebiscuit Europe" and toward the great beyond. For a more detailed account, see Vichnar, "Radiantly Splattered," 5-45.

14   Dragan Aleksić, "Dadaizam," *Zenit* 3 (April 1921), translated by Maja Starčević as "Dadaism," in *Between Worlds*, 350.

15   Ibid.

tempted to read it. Vischer's expectations from his Dada alignment were nothing short of earth-shattering: in a French salutation to Tzara and Picabia from April 1920, Vischer announces the publication of *Sekunde* as no less than "a bomb which has to burst open with infection the skulls of our dear 'bourgeoisie.'"[16]

The subsequent, if patchy, Vischer/Tzara correspondence promised to yield remarkable fruit. In the summer of 1921, Tzara set out for Czechoslovakia. Tzara's biographer Marius Hentea records Tzara's visit to Karlsbad and Prague, including a meeting with "Melchior Vischer, one of the leading Czech Dadaists," before Tzara continued on to Tyrol in September.[17] Among other things Tzara and Vischer discussed Tzara's hugely ambitious *Dadaglobe* project—an international anthology of Dadaist writings which, had it been realised at the time, would have served as a definitive statement (involving 76 contributors from seventeen countries). Until recently, the few critics writing on Vischer raised doubts over whether such a project had ever really existed. These doubts have been definitively put to rest with the 2016 publication, by Kunsthaus Zürich, of *Dadaglobe Reconstructed*, a monumental archival compendium approximating as much as possible the shape and form of Tzara's original intentions.

Dadaglobe Reconstructed makes it clear that not only was Vischer integral to Tzara's project from the outset (his name featuring right next to Tzara's in the *Dadaglobe* prospectus published in *New York Dada* on April 1921), but that his work was to feature prominently in what would have been the most comprehensive overview of Dada to

---

16   Melchior   Vischer,   *Unveröffentlichte   Briefe und Gedichte*, edited by Raoul Schrott (Universität-Gesamthochschule Siegen, 1988), 7.

17   Marius Hentea, *TaTa Dada: The Real Life and Celestial Adventures of Tristan Tzara* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2014), 171.

date—including six previously unknown Vischer texts (one of them recounting his own embryonal beginnings, in a biblical parody: first was "melchior," then "dada," where "melchior was earlier than dada").[18] It is beyond question that, had the *Dadaglobe* project materialised, it would have secured Vischer's reputation as a major figure in the history of Dada. As it happened, or rather did not happen, the project—for complex reasons—came to naught at precisely the time at which Dada itself was being superseded in Paris by a nascent Surrealism.

3. At around the same time as Vischer began his correspondence with Tzara, Walter Serner—a native of Karlovy Vary—published his "manifesto," *Letzte Lockerung* [*Last Loosening*] ("What can the first brain that appeared on this globe possibly have been doing?"), anticipating by several months Tzara's own "Dada Manifesto 1918."[19] If Vischer is one of Dada's most marginalised and forgotten figures, then Serner, though doubtless better-remembered, is its most mysterious one.

Born Walter Eduard Seligmann into an intellectual Karlsbad Jewish family, Serner started his career very much like Vischer—in journalism. In 1910-11, having matriculated at the University of Vienna's Law Faculty, formally converting to Catholicism and changing his name to Serner, he acted as a Viennese culture correspondent for the *Karlsbader Zeitung* owned by his father Berthold

18   *Dadaglobe Reconstructed* (Scheidegger and Spies: Kunstahus Zürich, 2016), 146.

19   Section 4 of which, incidentally, concerns "the novel etc.: the gents talk as if on the spit, or lately not at all. Just a little more sweat and the thing is a success: belles lettres!" See Walter Serner, *Last Loosening: 1-10*, translated by David Vichnar (London: Equus Press, 2018). Online: equuspress.wordpress.com//2018/09/12/walter-serner-last-loosening-1918-dada-manifesto-prague-dada-miscellany-part-five/

Seligmann. The name Walter Serner appeared for the first time under the inaugural piece in a series of feuilletons entitled *Wiener Kunstbrief* in November 1910. In the summer of 1911, Serner made use of his contacts within cultural circles to organise the first solo exhibition of a fellow Viennese Bohemian painter Oskar Kokoschka, acting as impresario and curator, publishing a few detailed articles on expressionist conceptions of the "beautiful" in painting and the fine arts, rejecting modern developments like cubism as false developments in which technique and formalism overcome the artist's personality, favouring instead a universalist aesthetics (Fig. 2).
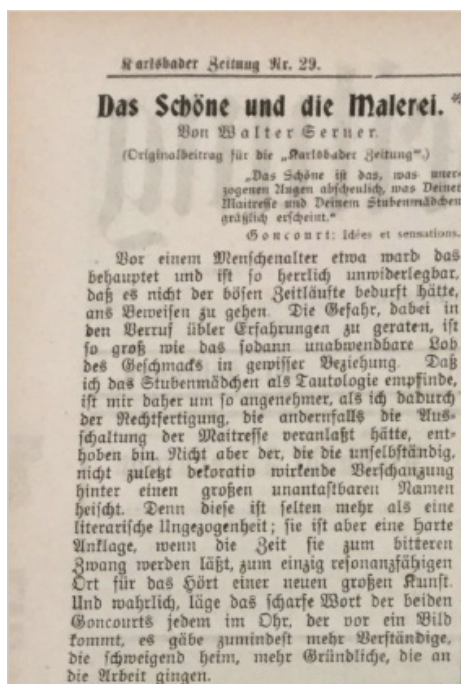
Fig. 2. Walter Serner, "The Beautiful and Painting," *Karlsbader Zeitung* XXV.29 (16 July 1911): 2.

Soon thereafter, Serner quit school and left for Berlin in 1912 where he became a contributing writer for the avantgarde magazine *Die Aktion* and associated with anarchists. A staunch pacifist, in February 1915, Serner left Berlin for Zürich, assisting with the passage of Hugo Ball. With Ball and Emmy Hennings he co-edited the magazine *Der Mistral* (where under the name Wladimir Senakowski he published his first prose work) and *Sirius* (where he published his first attacks on Ball and Huelsenbeck's 1915 "Memorial Reading for Fallen Poets").[20] A founding member of Dada, Serner was crucial in bringing about "a definitive change" in the movement's direction "between late 1917 and the demise of Zurich Dada in 1919, during which the influence of Serner, who brought considerable intellectual clout to the group, cannot be underestimated" in that "Dada became subversive" and "the group embarked on a campaign of mystification."[21]

Serner made a reputation for himself as "the great cynic of the movement, the total anarchist, an Archimedes who put the world out of whack and then left it to hang," the only Dadaist who could quite pull off the monocle, according to Hans Richter; while for Christian Schad, it was Serner who "fertilised Dada with ideas, who gave Dada its ideology."[22] What were these ideas? As Halas summarised in his 1925 lecture: "Dadaist is he who has understood that we can only have ideas when we can put them into effect."[23]

---

20   For more, see Malcolm Green's exhaustive account in "Translator's Introduction," in *Blago Bung Blago Bung Bosso Fataka!* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), esp. 24-34.

21   Ibid., 28.

22   Qtd. in Topinka, *Hadí kámen*, 105.

23   Halas, "On Dadaism," *Imagena,* 516.
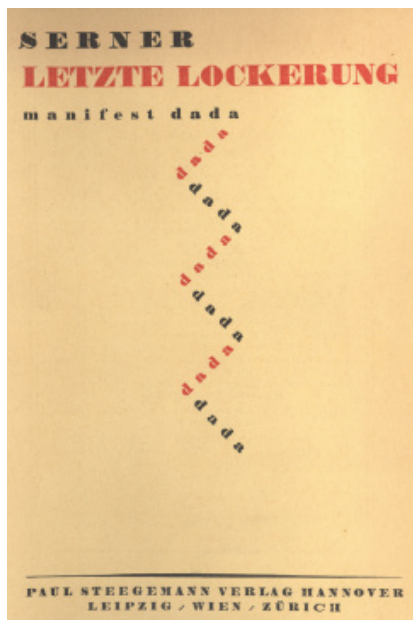
Fig. 3. Walter Serner, *Letzte Lockerung* (1918)

Serner's *Last Loosening* manifesto (Fig. 3), written in January-March 1918 in Swiss Lugano (and reportedly drafted as early as 1915), comes in 78 numbered paragraphs that keep cancelling themselves and everything else, combining the "scholastic rigor of Kant with a steady drizzle of insolence."[24] Its main theme, on which many variations are played, is that idealism is a con, that fixed identity is a danger to be avoided, and that at the root of everything are disillusionment and boredom. The manifesto bids adieu to the possibility of any aesthetic standpoint whatsoever by advancing provocative opinions and then cancelling them: "Every rule at one and the same time an

24   Rasula, *Destruction Was My Beatrice,* 156.

exception." Serner employs a whole gamut of poetical rhetoric while systematically undermining it with irony: "every word, after all, is just a compromise." The text thus keeps attacking not only the reader, but the author himself as well. A strategy clearly perceptible in the manifesto's opening lines:

> Around a fireball speeds a glob of excrement upon which ladies silk stockings are sold and Gauguins discussed. A truly, thoroughly distressing state of affairs that is nevertheless relative: Silk stockings can be grasped, Gauguins cannot. […] What might the first brain to appear on this planet have done? Presumably it was amazed at its own presence and didn't know what to make of itself and the filthy vehicle beneath its feet. In the meantime, humans have grown so accustomed to their brains they're considered of little importance and hardly even worth ignoring […].[25]

Last Loosening was not only dada's first manifesto, but also the scandalous high point of the final event of its Zürich phase in April 1919. Fellow Zürich Dadaist Hans Richter recalled, "*Last Loosening* was in fact the final word on and definitive watchword of all that Dada meant philosophically: everything must be loosened; […] screws and humanity on their way to new functions which can only be recognised once all that was has been negated."[26] Serner went on to serve as Chairman of the first Dada congress in December 1919 in Geneva, and started off on the *Dadaglobe* project as a close ally of Tzara's—alongside Cocteau, Picabia and Ribemont-Dessaignes, one of its

25   Walter Serner, *Last Loosening: A Handbook for the Con Artist & Those Aspiring to Become One*, translated by Mark Kanak (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2020), 14.

26   Hans Richter, *Dada Profile* (Zürich: Arche Verlag, 1961), qtd. in Green, "Introduction," 33.

five chief coordinators—but early in its editorial process (February 1920) decided to withdraw from it and turned into its most outspoken critic and ideological opponent—and his resignation took the entire movement along down in flames.

Much of Tzara's fame in Paris was built upon the Dada manifesto which he read in July 1918 in Zurich, first published in *Dada* 3 in December of that year, and the *Dadaglobe* project on which he rested his reputation. The Parisian avant-gardists were consequently nervously awaiting his arrival two years later, and were, according to André Breton, extremely disappointed at the famous Dadaist, who openly enjoyed himself and kept rehashing stunts that had worked in the past, the *Dadaglobe* nowhere in sight. Then Serner arrived together with Schad from Geneva (where their attempts at founding a Dada cell had floundered) and started spreading rumours that large portions of the manifesto were the work of Serner rather than Tzara; Breton put this accusation to use and in *Après Dada* in 1922 claimed that Serner had specifically come to Paris to expose Tzara's plagiarism.

This may have been a programmatic exaggeration on Breton's part, who by then found a foe more than a friend in Tzara, and some commentators in the past have propounded a more neutral view on the matter: Green writes that regarding Tzara's plagiarism, "Serner himself never made any claims one way or the other," having known Tzara "well before he allied himself with Dada," and noting that "Tzara would seem to have helped Serner gain a foothold in Paris by translating a text of his […] and by publishing him in the later issues of the magazine *Dada*." Still, even Green notes that

> after his arrival in Paris, Serner steadily distanced himself from Tzara and indeed Dada as a whole. It would seem that this was less because of Tzara's "plagiarism"

than because Tzara was posing more and more as the originator and supremo of Dada—the first claim being untrue and the second meaningless in a movement in which, according to Tzara himself, all its members were presidents. Tzara failed to come up with a ready answer to Breton's charges.[27]

More than that, as the *Dadaglobe Reconstructed* now brings into full view, Serner sent an anonymous letter to Picabia, who was by then the sole financial supporter of the project, presenting himself "as a friend of Huelsenbeck's" and revealing Tzara to be an impostor. Shocked at this intelligence, or perhaps just looking for an excuse, Picabia assembled a special "supplement" to *391* published as *Le Pilhaou-Thibaou* in July 1921, in which he announced his withdrawal from *Dadaglobe*, effectively pulling the plug on the project.[28]

---

27   Green, "Translator's Introduction," 31-2.
28   For more, see the detailed introduction to *Dadaglobe Reconstructed*, esp. 63-65.

Fig. 4. Serner's anonymous letter to Picabia, 23 June 1921. *Dadaglobe Reconstructed* (Scheidegger and Spies: Kunstahus Zürich, 2016) 78.

4. Vischer and Serner are indeed a complementary coupling: both were born on the wrong side of a very bad border at a very bad time, as it were; both sought escape from their personal identity in a pseudonym and from their national identity in avantgarde internationalism. Yet neither was quite able to fly by its nets and while Vischer came to praise Dada, Serner came to bury it. Taken together, Serner and Vischer resist an ideological positioning otherwise common in the art scenes of the new-established Eastern European countries: the notion that Dada is someone else's movement, with the new political circumstances calling for the need to create one's own, rather than derivative, avantgarde movements. And both resist subsequent critical attempts at "Berlinising" or "Balkanising" Prague

Dada, as a superficial and *foreign* influence, for these nativist views of the Prague art scene grossly misrepresent the internationalism both of Dada and the city itself—a dynamic very much critiqued by the Dadaists themselves.

Fig. 5. Kurt Schwitters, "To All the Theatres of the World," *Věstníček* **červené** *sedmy / The Red Seven Bulletin* (Nov 1919, I.9): p. 5.

Fig. 6. Ferenc Futurista, "Dadaist Poetry," *Věstníček* **červené** *sedmy / The Red Seven Bulletin* (Nov 1919, I.9): p. 6.[29]

29   Translation: "I DID SOME TALKING to my electric lamp last night—no, last year—and I recall its meaningful nod, screaming into the crowd of half-crazy cats: 'Circulation,

Yet the "very superficial view of Dada's doubtful value"—in which the contribution of Vischer, Serner and others is either minimised or ignored—has been taken as proof of Prague Dada's unimportance by modern-day avantgarde historians and critics. Jindřich Toman, writing in 1998 for *The Eastern Dada Orbit* collection, decided to entitle his piece "Now You See It, Now You Don't," turning Prague Dada into some kind of magician's vanishing act, believing that his "survey is balanced and detailed" though bemoaning "the rarity of primary sources."[30] But every vanishing act only happens in the eye of the beholder, and its credibility depends on what the eye does not see.

These and other similar dismissals are further contradicted by a number of eyewitness accounts of the early 1920s. Looking back on the early twenties from mid-decade called "Creative Dada," Marxist critic and translator Bedřich Václavek weighed the benefits of Dada even as he clearly thought its moment had passed. The Czechs "missed out on a strong dose of Dada after the war," he lamented, and had "to proceed without the torch of Dada to clear dense cultural underbrush."[31] As the Constructivist initiative gained momentum throughout Europe, it was often thought to follow in the wake of a salutary cleansing provided by Dada. Unlike the Franco- and Russophiles Teige and Nezval, Václavek was an educated translator

---

circulation!' What remains for tomorrow, with its scissors working busily—stitcheddy stitch—stitcheddy stich—leave unto tomorrow, I'll go back to my arc lamp and spend myself fondling the cinders. I'm welded to their cooling blackness, nattering and rattling—yes—the street demands that the victim carry a carbonaceous expression—my black, white, violet clarinet. I'm yours."

30   http://www.pwf.cz/rubriky/projects/dada-east/jindrich-toman-now-you-see-it-now-you-don-t_8054.html

31   Bedřich Václavek, "Creative Dada," *HOST Review* IV. 9-10 (July 1925): 278.

from German, and so was at least aware of what had been going on in Prague's German scene. His article therefore presents the first critical appraisal of Serner in the Czech context, also looking back to the periodic Prague visits and performances by Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck, Johannes Baader, and Kurt Schwitters in February/March 1920, and again in September 1921. These trips and performances were novel and exceptional not only in that they were met with "smashing success"—a reception at stark odds with the Dada soirées to which these Berliners were used.

Billed as "Anti-Dada-Merz" and taking place shortly after Hausmann and Huelsenbeck's violent break with Tzara, these Prague soirées suggested that an afterlife of the Dada movement would involve new strategic repositioning: it was in Prague that, for the first time, Hausmann shared stage with Schwitters. And, in an anecdote Hoffmeister picks up from Hausmann himself, on their way back to Berlin, "Schwitters got off the train in Lovosice and started composing a collage right there on the station platform floor,"[32] laying the groundwork for one of his most famous texts, the *Ur-Sonate*. Hausmann, the so-called Dadasof, always felt closely bound with Bohemia. His great-grandfather having settled in Stehelčeves (after Napoleon's defeat in Russia), his grandfather spent his active life in Kladno and Buštěhrad. His father spoke decent Czech and Hausmann himself included in his correspondence and poetry Czech words, even though garbled. As Kundera reminisces, "his connection to Bohemia was so legendary even Walter Mehring in his memoirs speaks of Hausmann as of a Viennese Czech poet!"[33]

It is very clearly erroneous to limit the perception of Prague Dada to any sort of "foreign" import, whether

32   Hoffmeister, *Čas se nevrací*, 197.
33   Kundera, "Dada in Bohemia and Moravia."

Western or Eastern. Surely the Berliners would not have enjoyed their first "smashing success," nor would the Zagrebians throw Dada soirées for a thousand spectators in attendance, had there not been a burgeoning native scene. That Prague Dada spawned remarkable work is not in doubt, however much it has come to be obscured by the competing interests of art history and the very politicised nature of the cultural discourse in which it was rapidly subsumed after the 1920s. Yet the coherence of Prague Dada becomes visible not only through an archaeology of textual sources but lies there undisguised in the fabric of many of the city's avant-gardist cultural landmarks.

Founded in 1909, the *Red Seven* cabaret had been a disruptive force long before the inception of Dada, but by 1920 it was indelibly associated with this anti-movement's Prague iteration. With Café Montmartre as its headquarters, the cabaret in the pre-war years was a new development in popular entertainment and experimental theatre. At its helm stood popular song composer Karel Hašler (an expelled member of the National Theatre), street-lawyer-without-degree Jiří Červený, and the painter Pittermann (whose *nom de plume* was Emil Artur Longen). Alongside these three there frequently appeared the humourist Jaroslav Hašek, whose reputation in Prague's subversive artistic circles as well as the Austro-Hungarian police files preceded him long before he authored the immortal *Good Soldier*. Always the merry prankster and troublemaker, Hašek performed comical sketches and gave mock-serious lectures, interspersed with musical numbers, and often used his stage-time for conceptual provocations and anti-theatre spiels. "One time," reminisced the café's owner, Josef Waltner, "he had just returned from his trips around Bohemia, sat down on the stage and very slowly and methodically started to take off his shoes and foot-rags

in front of an audience expecting laughs and pranks."[34]
After more similar excesses the owner banned Hašek from
the premises. Still, as Radko Pytlík's authoritative biogra-
phy of Hašek's pre-war years shows—notably recounted
in a chapter called "Prague Dada"—Hašek never gave up
the playfully provocative mode: "the ludic principle is,
for Hašek the pre-dadaist, also the creative principle: The
principle of the game becomes the principle governing his
life."[35]

Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk* has ever since become a
cartoon cardboard character known worldwide, joining the
ranks of the Gargantuas and Don Quixotes of the canon;
a process which has neutralised the book's subversive iro-
ny, sidestepped the disruptive effects of the protagonist's
ambivalently performed/pretended idiocy, and blunted the
savage attack on authority of any kind of the book's nar-
rative voice. Contrasting Hašek's reaction to World War I
with that of the milder Karel Čapek, critic and translator
Peter Kussi has written:

> Hašek's reaction to World War I was satire, irony, ab-
> surdity: From the lunatic asylum inmate who believes
> that inside our globe there is another, even bigger one,
> to the Latrinen-general who believes the war will be
> won or lost in the latrines, just about everybody in *The
> Good Soldier Svejk* seems to have lost all sense. Hašek's
> book is bitter satire.[36]

A sentiment which, combined with the ludic element in
Hašek's writing, is of course thoroughly Dadaist, although

---

34   Qtd. in Radko Pytlík, *Toulavé house* (Prague: Emporius,
1998), 209.
35   Pytlík, *Toulavé house*, 222.
36   *Toward the Radical Centre: the Karel Čapek Reader*,
edited by Peter Kussi (London: Catbird Press), 11.

the Hašek revival took place much later and outside the Dada circles. As Pytlík sums up:

> During World War I, a great revival in art is undertaken by the Swiss Dadaists. They too depart from play, elevating the world's chance, banality and negation into key principles of their creation. By denying causal creation they react to the end of one period of the European civilisation. […] No-one knew of the unfortunate bohemian and roamer from Prague, yet Hašek was a true Dadaist before Dadaism. But there was no-one to understand that.[37]

Two more offshoots of Prague Ur-Dadaist activity deserve salvaging from oblivion: the one, composer Erwin Schulhoff, who stemmed from a Prague-based German Jewish family and, following his fighting in WWI as legionnaire in Italy, settled down in Berlin in 1919-1923. Forming friendships with painters Georg Grosz and Otto Dix, his exposure to jazz brought him, still in 1919, to set Hans Arp's *Cloud Pump* to music in a 5-minute, scrupulously notated "orgasm" for a female soloist called *Sonata Erotica*, one of the earliest examples of Dadaist music.[38] The other, philosopher Ladislav Klíma, who was a maverick recluse, self-taught ever since his expulsion from grammar school for harbouring "anti-Austrian sentiments." His radically solipsist and voluntarist system of thinking—a bizarre blend of Berkeley, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche for which he coined the term "egodeism"—found expression equally in tracts (*The World as Consciousness and Nothing*, 1904) as well as in novels and short fiction (*The Sufferings of Prince Sternenhoch*, 1928).

---

37   Pytlík, *Toulavé house*, 224.
38   For more, see Rasula, *Destruction Was My Beatrice*, 146.

Klíma's unfinished novella, *Voyage of the Blind Snake in Search of Truth*—written in German as early as 1917 with František Böhler—exhibits, according to historian Miroslav Topinka, "strong Ur-Dadaist features,"[39] despite the fact that only volume 1 of the book has survived. The fragment is conceptually Dadaist in presenting to the "dear dumb reader" a satirical episode set on the Zambezi River that involves an army of ants presided over by His Lousiness ("Lausislaus von Lausien"). Lausislaus forms alliance with a white snake supposed to secure for him world domination in exchange for a bucketful of alcohol. The snake's drunkenness backfires and ends up costing the ant army dearly. After the dust settles, the apocalyptic finale is brought to a conclusion as follows:

> Every piece of shite, however, will stop smouldering one day… The oppressive, suffocating darkness crept in, weighing on the earth like a boulder—and together with it its brother, the foul-smelling corpselike silence. […] Slowly, timidly, carefully, comic little stars began appearing in the skies, expiring every now and then like thoughts in a lazy head—stars big and small—thoughts in the hollow head of the divine beast—phantoms in the quagmire of the universe, innumerable, crazy eyes, peering out of the world's lunatic asylum…[40]

The satire on contemporary politics might feel rather evident and heavy-handed, the frequent talk of "bivaginal mucosa" rather puerile and misogynist, but the brutal depiction of a power-hungry war-mad out-of-joint world is unmistakably Dadaist, as is the frequent resort to blasphemy, expletives, and offense to the reader.

---

39   See Topinka, *Hadí Kámen*, 100.

40   Ladislav Klíma, *Podivné příběhy* (Prague: Česká expedice, 1991) 103.

5. The mid-1920s saw a true explosion of Dadaist activity in poetry, prose, and most pronouncedly theatre. František Halas' first poetry collection *Sepia* (1927) featured "The Boulevard of Dadaism" with the couplet "Give unto Laocoon his long-deserved enema / So he won't have to writhe anymore." As Kundera comments, this is a direct echo of Arp and Lissitzky's *The Isms of Art*, alluding to Arp's pronouncement that "Dadaism declared art to be a magic opening of the bowels, administered an enema to the Venus of Milo, and finally enabled 'Laocoon and Sons' to ease themselves after a thousand-year struggle with the rattlesnake."[41]

In 1925, Halas had also authored a lecture "On Dadaism," organised by the Brno Devětsil group and given on 10 December 1925 at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University. Framed by a Tzaraesque introduction and Groszian conclusion, the lecture is divided into four chapters covering the philosophy, art, politics, and morality of Dada as shaped by Halas' acquaintance with the work of Hausmann, Huelsenbeck, and Serner. At the same time, Halas' lecture also foregrounds a parallel domestic Dada tradition, especially the work of Jaroslav Hašek and Ladislav Klíma.

Following an opening borrowed from Tzara ("Take a good look at me. / I'm a dunce, a buffoon, a smoker. / Take a good look at me. / I'm ugly, I'm small, I'm dull. / I'm just like you all.") is a series of probes into Dada and philosophy, Dada and the arts, Dada and politics, etc. Halas' argument is rather free-associative, but appreciative and with many moments of insight:

> Dada has won its struggle against philosophy. It's a leap above what's human. In modern humans though. Our children will still, as we once did, spell out (the humbug

---

41   Qtd. in Kundera, "Dada in Bohemia and Moravia."

of education) in schools the one greatest Dada: Love the truth, defend the truth, speak the truth! Until death. J. Hus. Dada wants a life naïve, understandable, undifferentiated, unintellectual. The wittiness of serious things derives from the feeling of the sovereignty of the spirit. Dada has given the serious world a good kick.[42]

Apart from Halas and Václavek, who were more active in Brno, the Prague Dada scene featured para-poetists like Emil František (E. F.) Burian, Václav Lacina, and Karel Konrád, who in the mid-20s subjected the constructivist optimism of poetism to a Dadaist satire.

As early as 1920, composer and theatrical producer E. F. Burian had drafted *The Bassoon and the Flute* (1920), a theatrical fairy-tale ballet inspired by *Ballet mécanique*. In 1925, he started publishing *Tam Tam*, a journal presented as a "musical handbill," whose title itself echoed Dada as well as the smack of a tambourine. "Aesthetics, formerly the Science of Ugly Beauty, Now the Science of Beautiful Ugliness"[43] was Burian's opening provocation. As he wrote in a later piece,

> Through Dadaism we got truly enriched in beautiful corporeality and optimism. Dada showed us street melodies and squeaking orchestrations, brought us jazz and pianolas, the lewd melancholy of bar girls, introduced our sensibility to the finest vibrations of absolute sound beauty. After Dada we appreciate ugliness and chance—these unquestionable advantages of admirable eccentricity, of a noisy, foolish fox-trot and a drunken hottentot.[44]

---

42   František Halas, "On Dadaism" (1925), *Imagena* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1971), 514, 520.

43   Qtd. in Rasula, *Destruction Was My Beatrice*, 275.

44   Translated by Jindřich Toman. Qtd. in Toman, "Now You See It, Now you Don't," 27.

In 1926, Burian also authored the poetry collection *Idioteon*, whose very name referred to the anti-rationalist Dada spirit. Its anti-bourgeois, brutal, iconoclastic and anti-war outlook manifests in texts parodying poetic clichés such as "Mother to a Child" (Fig. 7).
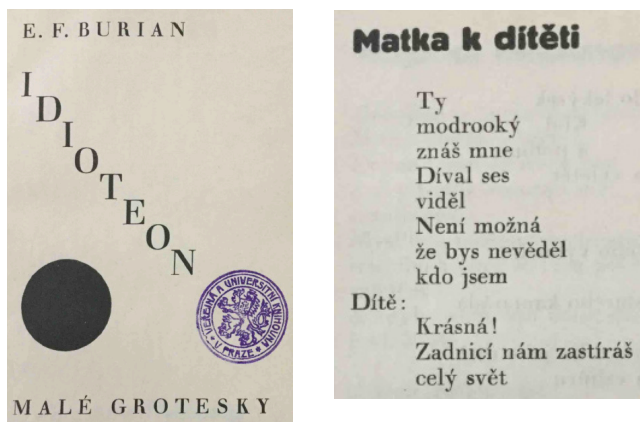
Fig. 7. E. F. Burian, "Mother to a Child" (*Idioteon* [Prague: Olymp, 1926] unpaginated)[45]

In 1927, under the Dada auspices of the Frejka Theatre, Burian premiered his Voiceband, a polyphonic group drawing on jazz syncopation spiced with the sort of vocalising Burian may have picked up from the performances of Schwitters and Hausmann (Fig. 8).

---

45   Translation: "You / Blue-eyed one / You know me / You looked / You saw / Impossible / that you shouldn't know / Who I am. / The child: / Lovely one! / Your arse is blocking off / our entire world."

Fig. 8. E. F. Burian. "What is Voiceband?" Leaflet advertising a Dada Theatre performance of Jean Cocteau's *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* and Václav Lacina's *Suspended Table No. 1*

Václav Lacina's collection *Bristling* (1925) brims with satirical barbs at the perceived institutionalisation of poetism as *the* artistic dogma, starkly at odds with its anti-artistic foundations. Take for instance, his "Nonsensical Poem," in which Prague literary life is mockingly reduced to "literary bars" (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Václav Lacina, "Nonsensical Poem" (*Zježení* [Prague: F. Svoboda, 1925] p. 23).[46]

Karel Konrád published *TRN* (*Thorn*) student magazine from 1924 onwards, a parodic and provocative tabloid in the spirit of Hašek, which included a number of Dada-texts and pseudo-manifestos, as well as photo-montages—and consequently, often faced censorship and confiscation (Fig. 10).

---

46   Translation: "I'd like to ride an ox-drawn tram / one child's ticket across / there's so many literary bars in Prague / and none called BAR KOKHBA / my heart's a cuckoo clock / DADA / never fades."
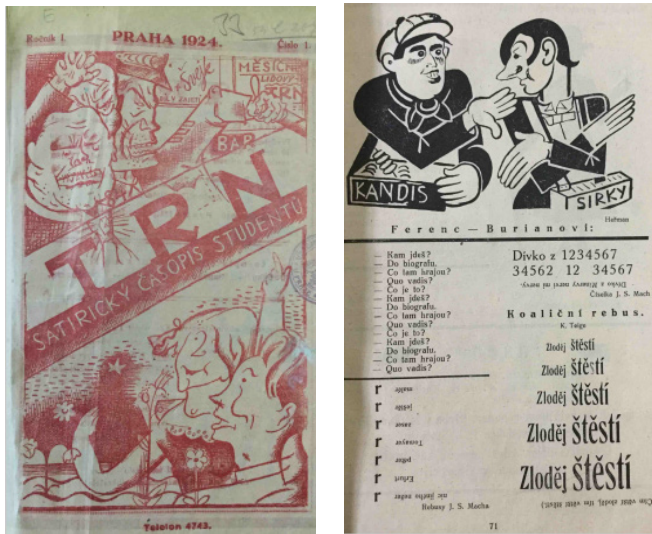
Fig. 10. *TRN* (*Thorn*), title page of Vol. I issue 1, 15 Jan 1924, and a
sample page of its innovative typographical layout.

Announcing the first issue was an "Editorial
Declaration," published as a leaflet in December 1923,
co-authored by Konrád with Josef Dubský, Bedřich
Pschürer, and Břetislav Mencák: "Students come to uni-
versities in order later to become bureaucrats, engineers,
doctors, lordships, and it is in this bureaucratism that lies
the greatest danger of decadence of contemporary society.
[…] But we're not only students, we're first of all people.
Our front shall not be demarcated by our student status.
We're going to fight along the entire front: *so that human-
ity is free, strong, and healthy.*"[47] Konrád followed his
TRN activities with such prose works as *Rinaldino* (1927)

47   Qtd. in Karel Konrád, *Z časů Trnu* (Prague:
Československý spisovatel), 10-11.

and *Dinah* (1928), whose interlinguistic puns and satirical barbs betray a Dadaist sensibility.

In the mid-1920s, Prague Dada also went on stage. Founded in late 1925, the Liberated Theatre, co-founded by Jiří Frejka, Jindřich Honzl, and E. F. Burian, quickly became the best-known cabaret-scene in Prague and carried Dadaist absurd language comedy and anti-bourgeois socio-political satire well into the 1930s. It staged contemporary avantgarde pieces both from abroad (Apollinaire, Marinetti, and Ribemont-Desaignes were fixtures) and the domestic scene: Hoffmeister's own Dadaist theatre production premiered here in 1927 and 28. Most notably, Hoffmeister's *The Bride* (1927), "an American comedy in three acts," and *Passepartout* (1927) are marked by an interest in sonic experimentation and the technology of communication. *Passepartout* features "two millionaires sitting in two skyscrapers" with "six telephone girls" providing their communication channels, all to the bewilderment of a drunken passer-by (Fig. 11).
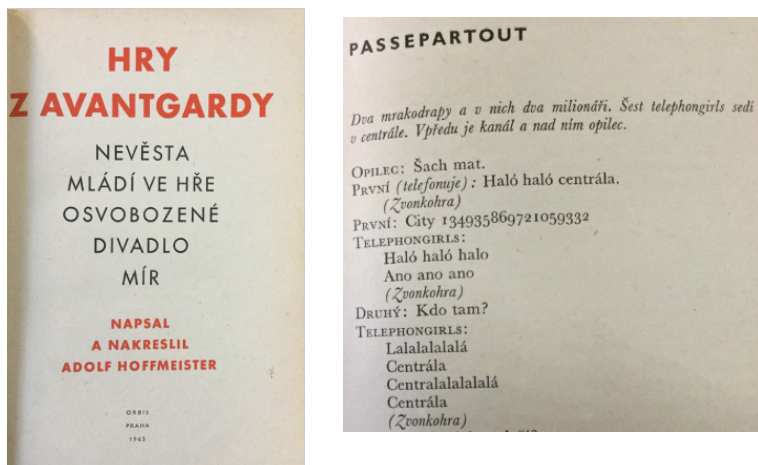
Fig. 11. Adolf Hoffmeister, *Passepartout*, from *Hry z avantgardy* (Prague: Orbis, 1963), 61.

With the premiere of *Vest Pocket Revue* in 1927, the authorial collective of Jiří Voskovec, Jan Werich and Jaroslav Ježek established themselves as the driving force of the theatre. Voskovec and Werich wrote the scripts and took care of the slapstick physical acting (oftentimes stylised as two clowns), while Ježek provided the jazzy/bluesy soundtrack. Voskovec (1905-1981) in particular, contributed to the critical discourse with his essay, "The Turtle No-One Mentions." There, he sought to put the poetist vs. Dadaist debate to rest, insisting that Dada was more than negation and anti-art, and that the poetist insistence on the death of art is misguided, pointing out that "after art ceases to be art, its corpse will still be an honest art corpse":

> When your deepest and humblest calm becomes settled in the frothiest glass of your fiercest passion, when amidst the most Dadaist and heretical guffaw you amicably smile at the most intolerable classic, when you shed a tear at the moving parallelism of the most contrary artistic movements of the past, present, and future, when during the grand armistice of relativity your left hand starts choking all your arch-enemies while your right is caressing its dear friends, art will appear to you, the magnificent animal, the turtle, "hesitant and firm," the turtle no-one mentions.[48]

Later on, Voskovec and Werich dealt in an offshoot of Dadaism called *hovadismus* ("dunceism") and defined as "a feature endowing certain human performances and creations in any discipline such obstinate idiocy and inappropriateness their negative effect seems to overexpose aesthetic sensitivity, thus becoming by way of an intentional error registered in the form of seeming beauty."[49]

---

48   Jiří Voskovec, "The Turtle No-One Mentions," *Fronta Review* (Prague and Brno, April 1927), 122.

49   Qtd. in Kundera, "Dada in Bohemia and Moravia."

After a break with the Liberated Theatre in 1927, Frejka went on to found the short-lived but important Dada Theatre, which for two seasons continued staging some international avantgarde production in translation (such as Schwitters' *Schattenspiel* and Apollinaire's *Mamelles de Tiresias*) as well as domestic, e.g. Lacina's texts for the theatre *Visací stoly* (*Suspended Tables*) and *Ozubené okno* (*A Cogged Window*). In two of his critical essays from 1927 and '28, Frejka clearly aligns himself with the iconoclastic, socio-critical legacy of Dadaism. In "Psychology, Psychology, Hehe" Dadaism for Frejka represents theatre devoid of psychologism and reductively "social function":

> DADA represents nothing. It's a function. Not one randomly "chosen," but a necessary play of artistic as well as acting intelligence. Dada is a protest against dragging private trains of thought into art. Dada is more than an idea in an unexpected place, surprising us like a pipe without a shank, amusing merely through its absurdity. Dada is the necessity with which the bird sings. Dada is neither foolishness—nor wisdom—nor irony. […] And finally: dada is a protest against the lawless plundering and hawking of non-artistic categories within art.[50]

In "Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart," Frejka reminisced over the rationale behind the project, linking the poetics of Dada Theatre with the variety show and the "journalistic" mode of production: "Founding Dada, we founded—to the horror of the young artistic philistines—a cabaret. We put art into work rather than words. [… The cabaret is a caricaturing journal. A distorted mirror

---

50   Jiří   Frejka,   "Psychology,   Psychology,   Hehe" *Demokratický střed* IV.24 (8 Apr 1927): non-paginated.

in which your face grimaces however dotingly you aim to look."[51]

Halted, yet clearly not entirely thwarted, by the dominant poetist reactions and reductions of the times, the second wave of Prague Dada in the mid-20s took place as programmatic continuation of the Ur-Dada attempts of the 1910s, in active engagement with the Berlin Dada scene, and with a few intriguing departures that broke new ground. Starting off in the radical fringes of the cultural scene (in leaflets and low-key journals such as *Tam-Tam* or *TRN*), via poetic parodies of Halas, Lacina and Burian, Prague Dada culminated round 1927 with the establishment of Dada Theatre associated with Frejka and Liberated Theatre (Hoffmeister, Voskovec) with its programme of "dunceism."

6. It is necessary to reassess, then, the entire character of Dada's status in Prague between the wars and to come to terms with the fact of Prague Dada as a distinct cultural phenomenon. In doing so, it is necessary also to recontextualise key aspects of the history of European avant-gardism between the wars and to understand in a different light the significance of the ongoing exchanges between Prague and Berlin Dada that characterised the major avantgarde developments in the region during the 1920s and 1930s—no longer as isolated incidences, but as part of an integral narrative with a number of wide-ranging implications.

For its part, Poetism sought to absorb and neutralise Dada as part of the cultural tendency of the age, in which jazz, sports, dancing, music hall, and the circus were extolled as "places of perpetual improvisation," valued precisely because they were unpretentious and, above all, not art. Teige's crucial collection of essays may have been

---

51   Jiří Frejka, "Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart: At the Cabaret," *Signál* I.3 (1928): 74.

entitled *On Humour, Clowns, and Dadaists* (1924), but here Dada is reduced to "merry-making" and "pleasing tomfoolery" practiced by "a pack of rogues": "Dadaism is a fun and not undeserving literary movement" which is "posed against art and brings capricious and merry art… Mysticism and humour marks the artistic creativity of lunatics: but in Dadaism mysticism is scarce. They are a pack of rogues."[52] When later on, in *The World that Laughs* (1928), Teige revisits the subject, he paints Dada as pure negation and revolt, and posits the necessity of "hyperdada" or "surdada," designed to "restore Dada to the action of actual life":

> Dadaism is anarchistic and annihilating revolt, which has devastated the world of art. Mightily and passionately did it hate and negate every intention, authority, and organisation. It lived solely on its chaotic desire for the absolute freedom of inspiration, for the absolute unshackling of imagination. […] But we would like to introduce here something we shall call "hyperdada" or "surdada," something more profoundly dada than the dada literary movement; i.e. Dadaism that is remote from literature and grows out of the movement and action of actual life.[53]

Only slightly subtler is the 1924 interpretation of Dada by Teige's friend and ally in poetism, Vítězslav Nezval, who acknowledges the destructive efficacy of Dada: "Dadas are furniture movers. They have thoroughly dismantled the modern bourgeois' living room," he writes,

---

52   Karel Teige, "On Humour, Clowns, and Dadaists," *Pásmo Review* II.1 (October 1925): 7.
53   Karel Teige, *The World That Laughs* (Prague: Jan Fromek, 1928), 47, 31.

and if "we are now standing in the demolished room" then "it is necessary to make a new order."[54]

In many respects, the period from the late 1920s through the mid-1930s provides the key to understanding the situation of Prague Dada during the previous decade. It represents a period of consolidation within the Prague avantgarde between a mainstream represented by Devětsil, poetism and later surrealism (whose principal figures were Teige and Nezval), and a continuing current of Dada situated both aesthetically and politically on the radical fringe. During this time Teige published a series of articles—in *ReD*, *Disk* and *Pásmo*—by turns misrepresenting, attacking, dismissing and outright appropriating Dadaism, and it is this line that predominated into the 1960s and again after 1989 in some of the contemporary criticism critiqued above.

Only during the 1960s did research into the city's Dada and "Ur-Dada" movements commence with any seriousness. In particular, and as evidenced in this overview, Hoffmeister's 1963 and 1965 memoirs and eye-witness accounts of the 1920-21 Dada visits from Berlin and of the beginnings of the Liberated Theatre, Kundera's "Dada Panorama," serialised in *Světová literatura* in 1966, Topinka's critiques of Teige and exploration of the "forgotten" Serner, as well as Chalupecký's later meditations on Czech dada vis-à-vis surrealism and revival of Heartfield's work—all these have secured Prague Dada a temporary reprieve from oblivion.

Intriguingly, these efforts overlapped with Tzara's willingness, later in his life, to revisit and finally publish (forty years after its original publication date) the *Dadaglobe* anthology—Michel Sanouillet, one of the anthology's reconstructors, recalls how in summer 1963 (Tzara's last), it was

---

54   Vítězslav   Nezval,   "Dada   and   Surrealism," *Fronta Review* (Prague and Brno, April 1927): 22.

still far from clear if *Dadaglobe* had been a real project, a figment of imagination, a spoof, or a joke. Asking Tzara himself,

> he assured me that *Dadaglobe* had indeed been a real project. He expressed his deepest sadness that he did not manage to finish the book. What, I asked, did it flounder on? What has become of the material he had received for it? Why was it—apart from *New York Dada*—nowhere mentioned […]? Tzara answered evasively that the project had failed primarily due to the lack of economic means.[55]

Still, when in 1966 Sanouillet published a reconstructed map and name list of *Dadaglobe* contributors, and approached the many still-living contributors with a re-publication request, "some, like the later surrealists Louis Aragon, André Breton, and Paul Éluard, did not feel comfortable about their earlier works becoming restored in their original context," and so *Dadaglobe Reconstructed* had another 50 years to wait. And whatever chances of re-appraising Prague Dada there might have been in the mid-60s, these were quashed together with the Prague Spring.

7. Dada maintained a significant presence in Czechoslovakia throughout the interwar period. Up until the annexation of the Sudetenland and the declaration of the Nazi Protectorate, Prague had continued to serve as a major cultural crossroads, hosting among others a succession of prominent Dadaists—including Schwitters, who visited multiple times, Walter Mehring, Hans Richter, Max Ernst, et al. The Liberated Theatre and the Dada Theatre, for example, were already mentioned as important conduits

---

55   Anne and Michel Sanouillet, "Vorwort," *Dadaglobe Reconstructed*, 8.

for the channelling of domestic and foreign artistic energies; in the late 1920's *Krasoumná jednota* staged a retrospective exhibition of Schwitters collages in Prague while František Kalivoda organised an exhibition of 42 collages by Hannah Höch at the Masaryk student house in Brno.

John Heartfield—who, along with George Grosz, is considered one of the inventors of photomontage—spent six years in Prague from 1933, mostly producing anti-Nazi art for his brother Wieland Herzfelde's communist-affiliated *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*. Throughout that time, Heartfield's name remained near the top of the Gestapo's wanted list and his work was repeatedly the object of police suppression at the behest of Hitler's government. In 1934 and 1937 Hoffmeister curated major exhibits at Mánes Gallery in Prague featuring work by Heartfield—both censored by the Interior Ministry. Heartfield fled Prague in 1938, ahead of the Nazi invasion, along with Hausmann, who had served for the previous two years as Prague secretary of the International Association of Architects.

In a letter to Jindřich Chalupecký on 7 April 1965, Hausmann recollected his relationship with Teige at that time: "I have to confirm that Czech artists and sculptors wanted to have nothing to do with me in 1937-38, especially Mr Teige. I'd like to mention that Teige knew about my person and work quite a lot, having collaborated with the *G* review, edited in 1921-4 by Hans Richter." Four years later, in a letter to Topinka (20 November 1969), Hausmann wrote: "When I was in Prague in 1937-38, Karel Teige—who had known me well—not only ignored me but since (in that period) he was a Surrealist, actively campaigned against me."[56]

Derek Sayer's *Prague: Capital of the 20th Century* ably charts the belated emergence—within this period—of Prague surrealism, which first declared itself in 1934

---

56   Topinka, *Hadí Kámen*, 89-90.

and cemented its claims with Breton's and Paul Éluard's visit the following year. It is singularly notable, however, that at precisely the time Teige and the Devĕtsil group first declared their affiliation to the surrealist movement, Heartfield and Hausmann, just as Vischer and Serner before them, were being ignored. What we see is that, behind these competing critiques of "realist" aesthetic ideology among the Prague avantgarde (including both domestic and Italo-Germanic "national socialism" as well as Soviet "socialist realism"), is a critical-historical unreality that has remained troublingly underexamined in the broader modernist discourse.

The Dadaist's radical antifascist credentials may also go some way to explaining the whitewashing of the history of Prague's interwar avantgarde, considering the adherence of Teige and in particular Nezval to Communist Party orthodoxy and the effect of Stalin's Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler. The Protectorate would always be a sore point for the self-styled Prague avantgarde of the Poetists-turned-Surrealists, who—despite their frequent proclamations—had never in fact gone through a revolutionary period, being bystanders in 1938 as they were in 1918, annexed to the positivist project of the new Czechoslovak nation state and the celebration of Soviet Russia. The calculated indifference, tinged with passive aggression, of their initial response to Dada belied a reactionary "avant-gardist" play-acting, of the kind adverted to in Grosz and Heartfield's 1920 tract, "Der Kunstlump," in which they proclaimed: "All indifference is counter-revolutionary."[57] In the end, the *active* campaign against Prague Dada was merely *révisionniste*.

---

57   George Grosz and John Heartfield, "Der Kunstlump," *Der Gregner* 10/12 (1919/1920): 48-56.

Verita Sriratana

I BURN (MARX'S) PARIS: "CAPITAL" CITIES, ALIENATION AND DECONSTRUCTION IN THE WORKS OF BRUNO JASIEŃSKI[1]

I propose that new critical dimensions can be gained when Karl Marx's thoughts on the Paris Commune are read and understood alongside the work of Bruno Jasieński (1901-1938), the Polish writer and leader (also fiercest critic) of the futurist movement in Poland during the interwar period. Jasieński not only fulfils but also takes to grotesque extremity the concept of Marx's alienation by painting a deconstructive picture of Western "capital(ist)" cities in catastrophe, of beast-like machines and of human beings amputated, with parts of the sum of humanity horridly fetishised. Deported from France for his subversive 1928 serialised work *I Burn Paris* on the grounds that "it exuded blind and stupid hatred for Western European culture," ironically executed in USSR during the Great Purge and posthumously witch-hunted in Poland, Jasieński is a writer of alienation *par excellence*. His timely and timeless contribution lies in the ways in which he manages to burn even Marx's own Paris.

*Mainstream modernist temporalities disrupted: the futur-
ist socialist & socialist futurist as ideological and chron-
ological paradox*

Bruno Jasieński was born Wiktor Zysman on the 17 July
1901, approximately a year after the outbreak of the Boxer
Rebellion in China and approximately a month after
Picasso's first exhibition at the Galerie Ambroise Vollard
in Paris, in a village called Klimontów, Poland. He was
the son of a Jewish and later Protestant-convert provincial
doctor, Jakub Zysman. Jasieński went to secondary school
in Warsaw. After the outbreak of the First World War, he
continued his education in Moscow, where he witnessed
and embraced the Russian avant-garde movement. In 1918,
he studied at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where he
met older friends of the Futurist movement, notably, the
painter Tytus Czyżewski (1880-1945). He co-founded a
notorious futurist group called "Katarynka" or, in English,
the "barrel organ," which, in the 1920s, organised provoc-
ative futurist poetry readings in cafés. Jasieński endeav-
oured to experiment in terms of logical and literary "som-
ersaults" to shock people into thinking and questioning
their society. One example of such poetic "somersaults"
can be seen in one of his poems called "Nic" ["Nothing"],
which contains not a single word. This is the degree to
which Jasieński takes seriously Charles Baudelaire's dic-
tum: *épater le bourgeois*, or "to shock/bowl over the bour-
geois," by means of subverting mainstream poetic conven-
tions: "Baudelaire sought to disorient, dismay, and shock
through his choice of subject matter, his rebellion against
tradition, and his blunt depiction of the human condition."[2]

   In the 1920s, Jasieński wrote a few manifestoes. The
most notable one is "Manifesto to the Polish Nation for the

---

   2   Ainslie Armstrong McLees, *Baudelaire's "Argot
Plastique": Poet Caricature and Modernism* (Athens and
London: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 102.

Immediate Futurisation of Life" ['Do narodu polskiego
manifest w sprawie natychmiastowej futuryzacji życia'],
where he outlines a particular stance and context of Polish
futurism different from Russian and Italian futurism.
While Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909
advocated for "new aesthetics" founded upon "an aggres-
sive movement, feverish sleeplessness, the pace of a run-
ner,"[3] praising war, and while the Russian futurists David
Burliuk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky and
Velimir Khlebnikov in 1912 signed a manifesto called
"The slap in the face of public taste," futurism in Poland
rose from the ash of a particular social context of a coun-
try which became independent again after 150 years of
partition and political slavery. Realism and nationalism,
therefore, were also imbued in the fantastic and grotesque
of Polish futurism.

In 1926, the same year when Mussolini proclaimed that
a certain style of Fascist art was needed for his Fascist re-
gime, setting the Italian Futurists in their fervent course to
vocally lobby for this role, and the same year when Kurt
Schwitters performed to great acclaim in two "grotesque
evenings," read his poetry and held an exhibition of 50
of his collages at the Rudolfinum in Prague, Jasieński
wrote *I Burn Paris* [*Je Brûle Paris*]. It was serialised
in *L'Humanité*, a French leftist newspaper, between 14
September and 13 November 1928, the year of the publi-
cation of André Breton's *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* and
Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as well as the year of the pre-
miere of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Dreigroschenoper*
(*The Threepenny Opera*). *I Burn Paris* opens with the
story of a young proletarian named Pierre, who has been
fired from his job and has been betrayed by his girlfriend,
Jeannette. He transfers his hunger, hatred, and jealousy

3   Agata Krzychylkiewicz, *The Grotesque in the Works of
Bruno Jasieński* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 46.

into his hatred for the whole world by setting out to con-
taminate Paris's water conduit with microbes of bubonic
plague. Parisians blame one another for the epidemic. The
plague leads to apartheid segregation, generating many
different separatist movements among the population in
the multicultural, multiracial and multi-ideological city of
Paris. For survival, people group together on grounds of
a common race, religion, nationality, and political creed.
In the book, we encounter many self-governing groups,
namely, French monarchists, White Russians, Jews,
French Bolsheviks, Anglo-American imperialists, Chinese
Communists, African jazz musicians and doormen who
behead or "lynch" white intruders in ceremonies appro-
priated from the Ku Klux Klan. We meet a character who
is a secular Jewish-American businessman with a mistress
on the Champs-Élysées, we meet the reclusive rabbi who
can speak with God whenever he pleases (innovatively
described by the writer in terms of telephone imagery as
having a "hotline" to God), we meet the aristocratic white
Russian officer who was forced to migrate and earn his liv-
ing by driving a taxi in Paris, we meet the French Bolshevik
leader who is ashamed of his intelligentsia origins and lit-
erary talent. The character I deem fascinating and visionary
of the writer is the Chinese urchin-turned-communist—
whom I shall analyse in depth. When translated into the
context of the history of the Paris Commune, the plague in
the book can be read as an allegory of the siege of Paris,
which led to the unification of Paris's working class. In
1897, when *La Revue Blanche*, one of France's most influ-
ential literary journals, ran an "Inquiry on the Commune"
in two of its issues asking the participants' thoughts on the
Paris Commune, a member of the Commune named Pascal
Grousset, who was also Delegate for External Relations,
replied: "The ruling classes had just given the measure of
their criminal incapacity. This is why our revolution was
proletarian and marks the pivotal fact of modern times,

which is the direct access of the workers to the mysteries of power."[4] Hence, one would expect the same romanticisation of socialism and the working class in Jasieński's book. However, our expectation would never be met by a writer sceptical towards any form of extremism. In *I Burn Paris*, the only group of people who survives the plague at the end is a group of "comrade prisoners," who have previously been locked up and away from the water supply and food resources of Paris. It is the comrade prisoners who gather the corpses of the dead and burn them, purging the city and the world from catastrophe of a massive scale. The burning of (the corpses of) Paris by the prisoners can be read as a critique of the romanticised view of the terrorist/revolutionary burning and destruction of Paris in 1871, one which is glorified in another response to the "Inquiry on the Commune" by Louise Michel (1830–1905), who views the burning of Paris as not the end, but the beginning of a new revolution: "But unvanquished under the avenging flames of the fire, it will be reborn even stronger, for it understood how useless political changes are that put one set of men in place of another set of men."[5]

Though the description of segregation and the picture of this proletariat group, in particular, might remind us of the Paris Commune, which Karl Marx supported and defended, Jasieński, according to my analysis and interpretation, nevertheless fails to paint the alluring picture of a proletarian state at the end of the novel. Paris is portrayed as far from being a phoenix rising from the cinders to save the world. The proletarians are portrayed as faceless brutes possessing no transformative power whatsoever. *I Burn Paris* can be read as a dystopian apocalyptic blend of

---

4   Mitchell Abidor, "Inquiry on the Commune," *Communards: The Story of the Paris Commune of 1871 as Told by Those Who Fought for It* (Marxist Internet Archive, 2010), 50-86: 54.

5   Ibid., 63.

futurist and socialist realist deconstruction of a capital, as well as capitalist, city. Though *I Burn Paris* is often read as Jasieński's transition from futurist avant-gardism to socialism, I argue that, through close-reading analysis, one can trace the scepticism or even disdain towards socialism. In his vision of the plague and the subsequent burning of Paris, the capital of bourgeois Europe, Jasieński reveals the infestation and the looming fire of destruction which lie equally within capitalism and within communism. An exposure of moral degradation and physical decadence of the European metropolis, it is not surprising that *I Burn Paris* was banned by the French government for the reason that it "exuded blind and stupid hatred for Western European culture."[6] Its subversive message was the reason that the writer was deported from France—twice.[7]

In this essay, I shall illustrate the connection between *I Burn Paris* and Karl Marx, who, on behalf of the International Working Men's Association, had staunchly glorified the Paris Commune, the radical socialist and democratic government which ruled Paris from 18 March to 28 May 1871 after the signing of an armistice to end the Franco-Prussian War and as a result of the working class population's attempt to seize power from the royalist Third Republic (the French government from 1870 to 1940). I shall discuss the ways in which we can interpret this book as a reflection of how Bruno Jasieński burns Karl Marx's Paris or, rather, burns Marx's wishful illusions of, as well as subsequent regrets for, the Paris Commune which, for example, is reflected in his statement: "But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state

---

6   Bruno Jasieński, *I Burn Paris,* translated by Soren A. Gauger and Marcin Piekoszewski (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2017), 294.

7   Nina Kolesnikoff, *Bruno Jasieński: His Evolution from Futurism to Socialist Realism* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 7-8.

machinery and wield it for its own purposes."[8] Jasieński's depiction of Paris offers a vacillation between the image of the Commune as an ideal system of government and that of the Commune as the anarchic regime which is not as democratic as Marx depicts in *The Civil War in France*. It is remarkable that, according to Gareth Stedman Jones in *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, though *The Civil War in France* was highly popular as it was published in three editions within two months, with the second edition selling 8,000 copies,[9] the pamphlet nevertheless documents Marx's failed attempt to defend the movement and regime eventually suppressed by the French army. The aftermath of the commune and the effect of *The Civil War in France* reveal that the content of Marx's pamphlet defeats its purpose:

> *The Civil War in France* did not succeed in stemming the hostile tide of public opinion. Over twenty years later, Karl's daughter Eleanor vividly recalled the climate: 'the condition of perfectly frantic fury of the whole middle class against the *Commune*'. So strong was the animosity towards the *Commune* and the *Communard* refugees that an attempt to book a hall to mark its first anniversary was cancelled by the landlord.[10]

The dream of a proletariat government built upon the foundation of financial, industrial and government infrastructure designed to sustain the authority and prosperity

---

8   Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, edited by Matthew Carmody (Marxist Internet Archive, 2009). Accessed 21 December 2018 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm

9   Gareth Steadman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 507.

10   Gareth Steadman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 510.

of the elites and the bourgeoisie backfires as the old ma-
chinery of power devours the naïve revolutionary ideals,
spurting out only deeper fractions and discontentment:

> From London Karl Marx concluded that the Paris
> Commune was not the anticipated social revolu-
> tion that would free the proletariat. That, he insisted,
> would come. Yet workers have risen up spontaneous-
> ly, so he was reassured. Lenin would add the leader-
> ship of the avant-garde of the proletariat, ultimately the
> Bolsheviks, thus turning away from an emphasis on the
> revolutionary spontaneity of workers.[11]

The fall of the Paris Commune, as the excerpt sug-
gests, is known to be the intellectual turning point for
Marx, which led to the revision of his thesis laid out in *The
Communist Manifesto*: "One thing especially was proved
by the Commune, viz., that the working class cannot sim-
ply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield
it for its own purposes."[12] The fall of the Paris Commune is
also the moment when the ideological difference between
Libertarian Marxism and Marxism-Leninism is grave-
ly pronounced, with Libertarian Marxist interpretation
of the fall as pointing towards the redundancy of a state
or revolutionary party to lead the working class political
movement as opposed to the Marxist-Leninist interpreta-
tion of the fall as pointing towards the necessity of a state
or revolutionary party to lead the working class political

---

11   John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of
the Paris Commune of 1871* (New Haven and London: Yale
University Press, 2016), 251.

12   Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Preface," *The
Communist Manifesto* (The 1872 German Edition). Marxists'
Internet Archive. Accessed 21 November 2018 https://www.
marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/
preface.htm#preface-1872.

movement, as reflected in Lenin's critique of the Paris Commune: "For the victory of the social revolution, at least two conditions are necessary: a high development of productive forces and the preparedness of the proletariat. But in 1871 neither of these conditions was present."[13]

To return to the Socialist Futurist and, at the same time, Futurist Socialist writer, following the publication of *I Burn Paris*, Jasieński was attacked even by Marxist literary critics for portraying Paris less as a capitalist industrial metropolis than as a depraved Sodom. The Marxists in France and other countries in Europe deemed this book to be less revolutionary than apocalyptic. Banished from France the first time, barred from entering Belgium and Luxembourg, Jasieński remained in Frankfurt am Main for a while and returned to France only to be expelled once again. In 1929, Jasieński moved to the USSR and settled in Leningrad, later becoming a Soviet citizen, where he was celebrated almost as a national hero. He also joined the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). For the Soviet apparatchiks, this was a writer deported from the West who could be "useful" as a cautionary example of capitalist oppression. The first Russian edition of *I Burn Paris* was issued in 130,000 copies and sold out in one day. The Russian version of this book, especially that which was published in 1934, however, is completely different from the French and Polish ones. In the Russian translation or, rather, adaptation of the original text, Pierre does not vengefully poison the water reserve. On the contrary, he becomes a mere instrument of the French imperial government, which supplies him with the microbes.[14] The mod-

---

13   Vladimir Lenin, "*The Militant*, 19 March 1932: Lenin on the Paris Commune (April 1911)" (Marxists' Internet Archive) Accessed 21 November 2018, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1932/no12/lenin.htm.

14   Ясенский, Бруно. *Я жгу Париж*. Электронная библиотека RoyalLib.com, accessed 19 November 2019.

ified version reflects and contributes to the propaganda at that time, which entails portraying the capitalist West as evil and self-destructive.

The fact that the USSR enthusiastically embraced Jasieński renders irony to this writer's fate. Because of the futurist provocative contradiction and ambiguity in his work, Jasieński was arrested by the NKVD, Stalin's secret police. The NKVD tortured him and extracted a false confession of Polish nationalist conspiracy from him, which led to his execution in 1938. According to the NKVD files, Jasieński was executed on 17 September 1938. He was buried in a mass grave in a collective cemetery in Butovo near Moscow. The last poem in his life, written in Butyrka prison, reads thus:

> A harbinger of victorious Communist ideas,
> A poet of glorious miraculous days,
> I lie behind bars as an enemy, and a criminal, —
> Can there be something more absurd than this?![15]

Behind the Great Purge was the intention to consign the names and existence of the purged parties to oblivion. Jasieński's literary works would remain censored and unpublished until his official rehabilitation in 1956. The irony and ideological paradox of a "futurist-turned-socialist" writer ruthlessly persecuted by the regime which he supported can be seen reflected not only in his life, but also his afterlife. His literary legacy, as I shall argue, is worth re-reading and re-examining in light of 21st-century political extremism. The following story, set in contemporary Poland, of posthumous reception and assessment of Bruno Jasieński's life, work and political stance affirms how mainstream temporalities of Modernism are not only

---

https://royallib.com/read/yasenskiy_bruno/ya_ggu_parig.html#20480.

15   Krzychylkiewicz, *Grotesque*, 64.

disrupted, but also questioned and challenged in this writ-er's case.

One might think that the literary legacy of Bruno Jasieński as one of the most important Polish writers should be beyond dispute. A literary fan club in Poland has created a website devoted to Jasieński's work and, since 2002, has held an annual Futurist festival with concerts & poetry readings in Klimontów, the writer's native town, called "Brunonalia." However, Jasieński's 21st-century en-thusiasts have ironically been propelled to mobilise against attempts to reverse his rehabilitation. Though Jasieński died as an "enemy of the people" in a political purge, one must admit that there is a stigma attached to this writer as a result of his association with the Communist regime in Russia. The most remarkable example of such a claim is revealed in a news article entitled "Czy Bruno Jasieński przestanie być patronem ulicy w rodzinnej miejscowo-ści?," ['Would Bruno Jasieński cease to be the patron of the street in his hometown?'] that, in 2009, Poland's Institute of National Remembrance notified the Klimontów Town Council that the street named after the writer was con-sidered to be "in essence, a form of glorification of the policy of Joseph Stalin, criminal communist ideology and its representatives which is directed against the independ-ence of Poland."[16] Jasieński's fans gathered signatures in protest. They argued in a petition: "If language is our spiritual homeland and the testament of our ancestors, then as a poet Jasieński did much more for Poland than have those custodians of patriotism who are currently accusing

---

16   Małgorzata Płaza, "Czy Bruno Jasieński przestanie być patronem ulicy w rodzinnej miejscowości?." *echodnia. eu*. (20 April 2009).Translation mine. Accessed 28 November 2018.   https://echodnia.eu/swietokrzyskie/czy-bruno-jasien-ski-przestanie-byc-patronem-ulicy-w-rodzinnej-miejscowosci/ ar/8542392.

him."[17] Jasieński's plight during his lifetime, as well as his afterlife, is a cautionary tale against not only Stalinist totalitarianism, but also contemporary political witch-hunts.

I Burn Paris (Commune)

The plague in Jasieński's *I Burn Paris* strikes on the eve of Bastille Day, or *la Fête nationale*, a national holiday. The mention of the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia allows us to date the novel around 1926-1927. This information seems to establish the work as a historical fiction. However, facts will be shaken with razor-sharp juxtaposition of images, namely, the personification of Paris as an old and decaying female actor who looks like a country bumpkin at a local fair and the erection of the Colonne de Juillet, or the July column, along with a number of bistros and brothels on the remnants of what was Bastille:

> THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS THE 14th OF JULY.
> Paris's intrepid shopkeepers, those who had stormed the Bastille to erect in its place an ugly hollow column "with a view of the city," twelve bistros, and three brothels for average citizens and one for homosexuals, were throwing a party in their own honor, as they did every year, with a traditional, republican dance.
> Decorated from head to toe in sashes of tricolor ribbons, Paris looked like an aging actress dressed up like

---

17   Marci Shore, "'A Spectre is Haunting Europe...': Dissidents, Intellectuals and a New Generation," *The End and the Beginning: The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History*, edited by Vladimir Tismăneanu and Bogdan C. Iacob (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2012), 465-494: 488.

a rube to star in some folksy piece of trash at the church fair.[18]

The "republican dance,"[19] a bitter satire of what once was the movement of hope and burning fire of revolution, seems to undermine the spirit of Bastille day, the day when the symbol of tyranny and absolute monarchy was toppled by the will of the people. Jasieński's description of Paris as the old unsophisticated female bumpkin signifies how Paris has become an awkward anachronism in the times when tyranny is stronger than ever. Tyranny of the most visible kind is Haussmann's renovation of Paris, which was commissioned by Emperor Napoléon III and directed by Georges-Eugène Haussmann between 1853 and 1870. It was meant to obstruct people from actively taking part in political gathering of all kinds: "[The modern public space] became a capitalist spectacle, a consumable vision of a civic world in which the surfaces of the city lacked any real meaning or engagement and in fact came to stand for estrangement and alienation."[20]

Also, the imagery of Paris as a woman is by no means a new invention. Paris and its inhabitants are particularly mentioned in a journal entry on the events taking place on Sunday 14 May 1871, which is part of *The Paris Commune Day by Day*, a journal documenting the 72 days of the Paris Commune written with hindsight by Élie Reclus (1827-1904):

> The people is a woman, as has long been said. More than any other the people of Paris is a woman. In a word, it is a Parisienne… Of course I held her in high esteem, but today, after a year of terrible tests, I am happy to

---

18   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 59.
19   Ibid.
20   Rosemary Wakeman, *The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

state that she has far surpassed my expectations… despite the terrible defeats we suffered at the hands of the enemy, despite the cruel humiliations he inflicts on us, Paris still has the red flag of the brotherhood of peoples flying over city hall, and it still goes into combat to the cry of "Long live the universal republic!"[21]

Jasieński's *I Burn Paris* ironically shows that, five decades later, the Paris (as well as its inhabitants) which Reclus describes has lost her grace, her prime and her sophistication as a city of revolutionary inspiration to the world.

The image of a monstrous capital(ist) city which devours human lives can be seen reflected in the description of the cityscape through the eyes of Pierre, a tormented man who suspects that his girlfriend, Jeanette, is betraying him for a richer man. The cityscape, therefore, can be viewed not only as a channel through which the writer criticises and chastises the capital(ist) city, but also as a psychological landscape reflecting the suffering of the protagonist, which leads to his decision to plague Paris and destroy the world:

Soon the garbage wagons would appear. The naked, coarse cobblestones — the bald, scalped skulls of the masses buried alive — would greet them with a long, clattering scream, passed from mouth to mouth as far as imaginable down the endless length of the street…
  The dry rattle of aching iron. The groggy, waking city struggling to lift the heavy eyelids of its shutters..
        Daybreak.
        Jeannette hadn't come home.[22]

---

21   Élie Reclus, "The Paris Commune Day by Day," *Communards: The Story of the Paris Commune of 1871 as Told by Those Who Fought for It*, edited and translated by Mitchell Abidor (Pacifica CA: Marxist Internet Archive, 2010), 87-123: 111.

22   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 14-15.

How the city is a real place and also a mental landscape reflecting the protagonist's state of mind can also be seen when it rains in Paris. When seen through the eyes of a paranoid and "anxiety-drowned" Pierre, the cityscape is described through psychedelic slow-motion ocean imagery. Automobiles on the streets are compared to strange iron fish swivelling in the deep. In the ocean imagery, a product of Pierre's twisted mind, expressionism here is seen in close collaboration with the socialist critique of capitalism: "Down in the wide valley of the riverbed, a tightly-packed school of bizarre iron fish with fiery, bulging eyes flowed past, swishing their rubber-tire scales, lustily rubbing against one another in clouds of bluish gasoline spawn."[23] I argue that Jasieński's Paris is depicted as real city and, at the same time, "unreal city."[24] The origin of the latter phrase, drawn from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, can be traced—according to Eliot's note—to Charles Baudelaire's 1859 poem "Les Sept Vieillards" ['The Seven Old Men'] which contains the depiction of a "[s]warming city, city full of dreams."[25] In the case of Pierre, who is losing his beloved, Paris is a city "of broken dreams," an underwater city swarmed with its menacing mechanistic monsters and factory products. Moreover, Eliot's "unreal city" also alludes to "The City," London's financial district north of London Bridge.[26] I argue that the city in question (whether it is Jasieński's Paris or Eliot's London *cum* Baudelaire's Paris, a place which is simultaneously "placeless" as it stands for the homogenised urban experience faced with

---

23   Ibid., 16.
24   T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, The Broadview Anthology of British Literature (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2011), 63-83: 66.
25   Ibid.
26   Ibid.

modernisation)[27] can be read as a palimpsest which, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is: "a parchment or other writing material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing." I also subscribe to Sarah Dillon's observation that *OED* omits the most significant attribute of a layered and superimposed palimpsest, which is that "[the first writing on the vellum] was often imperfectly erased"[28] as "[i]ts ghostly trace then reappeared in the following centuries as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air producing a reddish brown oxide."[29] The history of a city is layered. The past, which may seem to be effaced, nevertheless leaves a ghostly trace on the façade of the present. The city's past is always juxtaposed with, and thereby supplementing as well as complementing, the city's present. Hence, "an aging actress dressed up like a rube to star in some folksy piece of trash at the church fair"[30] is not only "palimpsestic" in the sense that the present serves as a reminder of the 1789 storming of Bastille, but also—to refer to Dillon's usage of the term—"palimpsestuous"[31] in the sense that Paris's *ghost of revolutionary past* resurfaces in the mental and physical landscape of Paris between the years 1926-1927. Paris, the old woman who once held the flag of liberty, equality and fraternity has now become a mere spectacle out of time and out of context. The people's revolution has succumbed

---

27   Daniel A. Finch-Race, "Placelessness in Baudelaire's 'Les Sept Vieillards' and 'Les Petites Vieilles,'" *Modern Language Review* 110: 4 (October 2015), 1011-1026: 1013.

28   Sarah Dillon, *A Critical History of the Palimpsest in Modern Literature and Theory*, PhD Diss. in English Literature (University of Sussex, 2005), 2.

29   Ibid.

30   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 59.

31   Dillon, *Palimpsest*, 4.

to the selling of goods and people as goods. The "cleaver-like" syncopated tune of Jazz music which resounds in the square and the patchy and irregular dance gestures from the multiracial and multicultural population form an unlikely backdrop for the imagined or re-enacted attack on the fortress-prison of Bastille: "Eight jazz bands were scattered across the tight square between La Rotonde and Le Dôme, their sharp cleavers of syncopation quartering the live meat of the night into chopped bars of entrails."[32]

Taking into analysis the following extract from *I Burn Paris*, however, I further propose that Paris as palimpsest evokes another important event in history already touched upon in the earlier section of this paper, the Paris Commune of 1871. Jasieński's description of Paris as a city of immigrants, as well as of cultural and professional diversity, evokes the Paris at the time of Karl Marx's first arrival in 1843.[33] This Paris is the setting of the subsequent event exalted by Frederick Engels thus: "Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat… Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat."[34] Instead of the fictional bubonic plague which Pierre deliberately uses to poison the population of Paris, the real-life ideological plague which transformed the cosmopolitan safe haven Marx remembered upon arrival into the warring, disjointed and segregated Paris of 1871 was the lack of industrial activity among the immigrants and working class during the Siege of Paris (19 September 1870 to 28 January 1871), as well as the atrocities of the Franco-Prussian war, which led to the establishment of the Paris Commune after the French defeat.

---

32   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 60.
33   Jones, *Karl Marx*, 146.
34   Marx, *Civil War in France*.

In *I Burn Paris*, for survival and to contain the plague, people group together on grounds of a common race, religion, nationality and political creed—but to no avail. Everybody dies. At the end, the only group of people who survives the plague is that of "comrade prisoners," criminal outcasts who have been locked up and away from the water and food resources of Paris. It is these prisoners who gather the corpses of the dead and burn them—purging the world, setting Paris on fire—hence the title. The description of segregation and the picture of this abject proletariat group, in particular, might reveal the phantasmagoria of the Paris Commune. However, I contend that, at the end of the novel, Jasieński also fails to paint an alluring picture of a proletarian state in that it is portrayed as far from being a phoenix rising from the flame to save the world. As I shall later show, the proletarians in *I Burn Paris* are portrayed as faceless brutes possessing no transformative significance whatsoever. Here, it can be said that Jasieński burns the revolutionary and utopian Paris of Karl Marx, who admits his flaws in his support of the Paris Commune. Jasieński the Futurist Socialist and Socialist Futurist seems to be scathingly making fun of the flat and over-romanticised one-dimensional portrait of the workers, the kind which Marx depicts or invents in his writing as follows:

> One can observe this practical movement in its most shining results, when one sees a meeting of socialist French workers. Smoking, drinking, eating, etc. are no longer there as means of connection and as connecting means… The brotherhood of man is no phrase, but a truth to them and the nobility of humanity shines out at us from figures hardened by labor.[35]

---

35   Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 149.

While Paris is burning with corpses, the comrade prisoners' governing body devises a plan to lure the world away from Paris. The results are twofold. One is the birth of a new Paris commune, an introverted socialist territory. The other is the birth of a new capital, as well as capitalist, city of Lyon. The vicious circle/cycle remains intact. Lyon becomes a second Paris and later—according to the vicious cycle of capitalism imagined by Jasieński—another plague-ridden city of exploitation as the capitalist mode of production produces once again the Jeanette who betrays Pierre and the Pierre who sets out to plague and destroy Lyon to vent out his frustration. The depiction of the incident which leads to the poisoning and burning of Paris is repeated in the case of Lyon. We can compare the first incident in Paris, which is:

> IT STARTED WITH A MINOR, SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT incident that was decidedly private in nature.
> One beautiful November evening, on the corner of Rue Vivienne and Boulevard Montmartre, Jeanette informed Pierre that she would most definitely be requiring a pair of evening slippers.[36]

to the second incident in Lyon, which is:

> One beautiful August evening, the streets teeming with that random and unsynchronized throng of extras cast every evening by Europe's rickety film projector onto the screen of Lyon's boulevards, on the corner of Rue Vivienne and Boulevard Montmartre, Jeanette informed Pierre that she would most definitely be requiring a pair of evening slippers.[37]

---

36   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 1.
37   Ibid., 276.

Through these cyclical and parallel narratives, Jasieński's bleak critique of greed and exploitation—regardless of the regime and political camp—comes full circle.

Jasieński's depiction of Lyon as the second Paris, a new capital/capitalist city in the making which is as equally decadent and oppressive as its plague-ridden and "burnt" predecessor, might remind us of the Marxism-Anarchism conflict, which is reflected in Marx's criticism of Bakunin's anarchist programme in Lyon. True, it may seem sensible that Marx condemns the Bakuninist view that the State must be abolished, and that the State could never—under any circumstances—be used to attain either Socialism or any form of social justice for the workers. However, in Jasieński's work, Marx does not have the final word. Though Marx and Bakunin seem to share the same anti-capitalist sentiment and objectives, the ends do not justify the means.

While Pierre views the plague as a means to purge Paris from capitalism, a remarkable character named P'an Tsiang-Kuei, who was born in China and migrated to Paris, views the plague as a European disease triggered and sustained by the local elites and capitalists:

Once a startled P'an asked:

"But then why do the white men come ride in our uncomfortable rickshaws if everything is so good where they live?"

Chow-Lin [father figure to P'an] laughed:

"White people like money. You have to work for money. White people don't like to work. They like other people to work for them. Where they live, machines and their own kind, whites, do the work for them. But there's never enough money for the white people. That's why they came to China and yoked up all the Chinese to

work for them. The Emperor and the Mandarins helped them…"[38]

Thus, it is not surprising that young P'an was fed to the English cotton mill set up and operated in China by the European capitalists in collaboration with the local authorities. When seen through the eyes of P'an Tsiang-Kuei, the cotton-spinning machinery—a classic emblem of mass production and colonisation—is, without a doubt, an integral part of the dehumanising and exploitative cheap labour, which has become almost a norm in contemporary times. The increasing banality of cheap labour can be seen reflected in Leon Trotsky's remarks of the dangers of reducing human beings to mere commodities: "The commodity has become such an all-pervasive, customary, and familiar part of our daily existence that we do not even attempt to consider why men relinquish important objects, needed to sustain life, in exchange for tiny discs of gold or silver that are of no earthly use whatever."[39] What follows is the fetishised aggrandisement of machines:

> The enormous machines were like monstrous two-headed dragons, swallowing gray skeins of oakum as filthy as smoke, then spitting them out in long, fibrous saliva, swiftly wound on the spinning tops of spools… The spools dibbled from the slobbering maws of the machines into the spittoons of gigantic baskets, and the filled baskets were carried off somewhere into the fog by spindly-legged boys, straining under the terrible weight.[40]

---

38   Ibid., 79.
39   Karl Marx, *The Essential Marx. Ed. Leon Trotsky* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1939), 1.
40   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 99.

Jasieński also uses grotesque imagery as a literary de-
vice to enhance the demonic quality of the machinery of
"dead labour," which confronts human life and "living la-
bour." The depiction of machines with steel muzzles which
churn and spit out ready-made things and commodities in
the "gigantic iron city of Eu Ro-pa"[41] is where Jasieński
touches upon the notion of "alienation:" "Alienation, Marx
claimed, is made worse by the entrance of machines into
production. Because machines automatically perform all
the interesting parts of the work, they render the proletar-
ian's activity dull and repetitive."[42] Alienation from what
Marx calls human "species essence" occurs when humans,
who are inherently productive and creative, become alien-
ated from the fruits of their labour, as well as from the
creativity and complexity which define them. The use of
and obsession with machines contribute to the loss of hu-
mans' sense of self: "The alienation expressed by com-
modity fetishism in the sphere of exchange is expressed
by machine fetishism in the sphere of production."[43] Thus,
it is not surprising that Marx depicts a similar mechanical
monster which P'an Tsiang-Kuei describes: "The infinity
of hands, hands beyond all measure, the gigantism of an
automated system of machinery: these are demonic. For
Marx they represent forces of past, or dead, human labor
solidified and standing over against living labor."[44]

The depiction of P'an Tsiang-Kuei's dream and aspi-
ration can be read as a reflection of Jasieński's scepticism
towards superficial reversal in class structure as a solution
to the problem of inequality:

---

41   Ibid., 81.
42   Amy E. Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and
Alienation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.
43   Wendling, *Marx on Technology*, 57.
44   Ibid., 146-147.

> [H]e'd spy, track down and smuggle out the white peo-
> ple's secret, bring it back to China, build enormous ma-
> chines everywhere, and he'd set white people at the ma-
> chines (Chow-Lin said workers were needed even at the
> machines), the ones who didn't like to work, and he'd
> force them to work day and night, so that the cowed,
> tired, and starved Chinese could finally rest.[45]

This naïve reverie of going to Europe to steal machines,
along with this capitalist and imperialist aspiration to es-
tablish himself and acquire the same status as the "white"
colonisers as a way to liberate his home country, would
die with P'an Tsiang-Kuei, amounting to nothing. The pit-
fall of such simplistic subversion of class and power while
unquestioningly maintaining the superstructure which,
in turn, sustains the hierarchy and inequality can be seen
played out in the history of Modern China: "apart from the
China of his homeland, with its Yellow Sea façade, there
were other Chinas, internationally, everywhere, where
backs are crooked, jaws are strained taut, cracks of eyes are
narrowed with hatred, and where a fat, majestic employer
presides."[46] Replicating the capitalist superstructure would
only generate more "Chinas" of forced cheap labour and
abject poverty worldwide. P'an's idealist vision is put to
the test with his decision to join the Kuomintang group:
"The Kuomintang was swarming with nationalist-leaning
bourgeoisie. Take away the foreigner's privileges, force
them to rewrite bad treaties."[47] Though Sun Yat-Sen's
Kuomintang group brought about the Xinhai Revolution of
1911, which led to the founding of the Republic of China
on 1 January 1912, nevertheless, by ceding the provisional
presidency of the republic to Yuan Shikai, the Kuomintang
idealism has created yet another totalitarian monster—in

---

45   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 80.
46   Ibid., 108.
47   Ibid., 105.

the same way that the Paris Commune's ceding power to the financial institutions and governmental infrastructure has led to its downfall, revealing how Marx can be said to share P'an's idealism when he stated that "The direct antithesis to the empire was the Commune."[48]

The topic of plagues in the capital(ist) city leads to a discussion of the implications of illness and vitality in Marx's thoughts. My reading of Dipesh Chakrabarty leads to the notion that the living labour—human vitality—can be read as the *pharmakon* in Jacques Derrida's (re-)reading of Plato[49] as its undecidability has the power to nurture and, at the same time, kill capitalism: "life, in all its biological/consciousness capacity for willful activity (the "many-sided play of muscles"), is the excess that capital, for all its disciplinary procedures, always needs but can never quite control or domesticate."[50] Workers have souls. They have needs to fulfil—be they hunger, love, dreams—the kind which the capitalist mode of production can never control or domesticate. Therefore, life becomes the ground of constant resistance to capital. A repetitive emphasis on the uncontrollable and "unquarantinable" disease or plague in Jasieński's work shows that it is also possible that life can also be the ground of constant resistance not only to capitalism, but also communism or any form of extremism.

Finally, the closing sentences of *I Burn Paris* cast the socialist victory in a much darker tinge—the tone is far from exultation. After having made the world believe that it is still plagued for two years, "Paris, capital of the

---

48   Marx, *Civil War in France*.

49   Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination,* translated by Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 97.

50   Dipesh   Chakrabarty,   *Provincializing   Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 60.

French Republic of Soviets"[51]—the palimpsestuous phantom of the Paris Commune—finally makes itself heard on the radio, thereby infecting the listening crowd of Lyon with morbid and self-destructive revolutionary plague:

> The black maws of the speakers blared the brassy fanfare of The Internationale.
>
> The crowds were consumed it seemed, by a frenzy. People ran, shoving and trampling one another. Thousands of mouths agape with astonishment picked up the lingering refrain of The Internationale.
>
> And under the billowing sails of the song the masses shuddered like titanic ships, creaking in their joints, swaying in the shallows of the roadways, and heaving forward.[52]

With this ending, Bruno Jasieński has lighted up a prophetic warning against all forms of extremism which reaches us across space and time. His fiery warning should be heeded in today's world.

---

51   Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, 290.
52   Ibid., 291.

PART III

KEEPING TIME IN MODERNIST WORKS

Ilaria Natali

THE FLUX OF BECOMING AND THE DREAM OF PERMANENCE IN A REFLECTION BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot […]
Alfred Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*

Presumably conceived in 1927 and first published in 1929, Virginia Woolf's short story "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection" describes an attempt to grasp an un-empirical reality unattainable though sensory perception. It is through visual impressions and contemplation, in fact, that a mysterious observer, while settled in "the depths of the sofa" of Isabella Tyson's drawing-room,[1] proposes to investigate the most hidden and elusive aspects of the mistress of the house's true self. It is not clear whether this observer is also the speaker since a salient stylistic trait of the short story is the consistent use of the gender-neutral, indefinite pronoun "one" (as in "one was tired of the things that [Isabella] talked about at dinner").[2] Monika Fludernik has already noted that the use of "one" seems to disguise any subjective consideration behind a sort of general consensus, a projection of "what everybody else is

---

1   Virginia Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 160 (1929): 46.
2   Ibid., 48.

thinking."[3]. Even more importantly, the indefinite pronoun prevents identifying the narrator's position in relation to the story-world, casting doubt on the narrative situation as a whole.

The unidentifiable visitor "could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall."[4] Thus, the source of most information about Isabella and her house is the looking-glass, which not only exerts an irresistible attraction on the observer's gaze, but also restricts their vision like a window-frame or a screen. Through this limited viewpoint, the observer proposes to "fix one's mind upon [Isabella]," "fasten her down" and "prize her open" in search for the "truth," that is, "her profounder state of being."[5] After having eluded close inspection by moving about in the garden, Isabella approaches the mirror, and her real self is suddenly disclosed:

> She stopped dead. She stood by the table. She stood perfectly still. At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her […]. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty.[6]

As Carmen Concilio remarks, rather than revealing Isabella's identity, the mirror denies it by bringing about a process of transformation which eventually 'kills' the

---

3   Monika Fludernik, "Pronouns of Address and 'Odd' Third Person Forms: The Mechanics of Involvement in Fiction," in *New Essays in Deixis. Discourse, Narrative, Literature*, edited by Keith Green (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 105.
4   Woolf, "The Lady," 46.
5   Ibid., 48.
6   Ibid., 49.

object of scrutiny, leaving behind only her "dead," "perfectly still" and lifeless imago.[7] Constraining and violating, the action of the mirror provides an unexpected result for the investigation of "what the truth about Isabella was,"[8] a result that scholars have found "unsatisfactory" and especially "unconvincing"[9] in light of the narrator and/or observer's unreliability. After all, as Renate Brosch notes, by the end of the story we have "learnt to distrust" the narrator's speculations and the observer's impressions, which have already proven wrong before, and "we are disinclined to believe the […] final statement."[10] One might also challenge the idea itself that the story presents a "final statement" or a close: "The Lady in the Looking-glass" remains at least partially unresolved, as suggested by the circular structure that begins and ends with the same

---

7   Carmen Concilio, "L'isotopia dello sguardo in alcuni racconti di Virginia Woolf," in *La tipografia nel salotto: saggi su Virginia Woolf*, edited by Oriana Palusci (Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1999), 122.

8   Woolf, "The Lady," 47.

9   See R. T. Chapman, "'The Lady in the Looking-Glass:' Modes of Perception in a Short Story by Virginia Woolf," *Modern Fiction Studies* 18/3 (1972): 333 and Shuli Barzilai, "Virginia Woolf's Pursuit of Truth: 'Monday or Tuesday,' 'Moments of Being' and 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18/3 (1988): 208.

10   Renate Brosch, "The Secret Self. Reading Minds in the Modernist Short Story. Virginia Woolf's 'The Lady in the Looking-glass,'" *REAL* 24 (2008): 209. I am thinking especially of two signals suggesting that both the narrator and the mysterious observer are unreliable in "The Lady in the Looking-glass." At the beginning of the story, after having associated Isabella to "the tremulous convolvulus" (Woolf, "The Lady," 46), the narrator disproves their own claim, suggesting that this simile is hardly appropriate for her (Ibid., 47). Later, the observer has difficulty in recognising the image of the postman reflected in the mirror (Ibid.), an episode that will be discussed below.

sentence, "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms."[11] In addition, scholars have often related this text to provisional and incomplete forms of writing, such as the sketch or the diary,[12] which are both inherently unfinished and unfinishable.

Triumphantly and ironically frustrating at various levels, "The Lady in the Looking-glass" saturates the reader with a sense of perceptual and cognitive puzzlement. The narrator is confused and confusing, their identity and gender remain mysterious, and they cannot be clearly located in space and time in relation to the events narrated. Equally enigmatic is the presence (or lack of presence) of the observer, an instance that does not necessarily coincide with the narrator. Apparently unwilling or unable to move and change position, the observer does not seek a different angle of vision even when the "gilt rim of the looking-glass" slices and cuts off parts of the scene they wish to analyse.[13] This figure is so elusive that we are led to doubt its physical concreteness: for one thing, Isabella does not seem to acknowledge the presence of a visitor in her house and acts as if she believes herself to be alone.

---

11   Woolf, "The Lady," 46, 48. It is not without irony that Woolf played with the various meanings of "reflection" in "The Lady in the Looking-glass." This noun points to the action of the mirror, to the observer's contemplation, and to the circular form of the text, which 'mirrors' itself. The short story abounds in instances of linguistic playfulness, such as using "one" as both an indefinite pronoun and an adjective in the same sentences (Ibid., 47), or turning figurative language into literal language (Ibid., 48). The latter technique is typical of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, a text that Woolf might have had in mind when composing her short story.

12   Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 173; Abbie Garrington, "Reflections on a Cinematic Story," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 50 (2008): http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/694.

13   Woolf, "The Lady," 46.

Moreover, the observer's own reflection in the mirror is never mentioned, as if they were not part of the scene that is otherwise described in detail.

The motionless, unseen, almost phantasmal "one" is both inside and outside the story-world and, even more significantly, is caught between different dimensions of time. There is, in fact, a dimension happening in Isabella's house, where "[n]othing stayed the same for two seconds together;" the dynamic quality of the image is linguistically emphasised by recurrence of the present participle, as in "curtains blowing" and "petals falling."[14] As opposed to Isabella's house, a dimension of time seems to be enclosed in the mirror, where everything becomes fixed and unmovable:

> But, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sun-flowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. It was a strange contrast—all changing here, all stillness there. One could not help looking from one to the other. Meanwhile, since all the doors and windows were open in the heat, there was a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the transient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality.[15]

The real-life flow of time apparently denies access to deeper knowledge of the world (and of Isabella), because the flux disarranges each image and breaks it down as if it were constantly refracted in a prism. By contrast, the mirror arrests and fixes fugitive sensory impressions, making observation possible. Almost calling to mind a

---

14   Ibid.
15   Ibid.

Parmenidean notion of the imperturbable (ἀτρεμές), re-
flected images enjoy a temporary state of stable tranquilli-
ty which seem to offer the mind the ability to recognise the
true nature of things beyond the uncertainty of the change-
able world populated by "nocturnal creatures."[16] Isabella's
mirror encloses a condition of stasis and suspension, a
non-time where, the narrator claims, objects are "grant-
ed that stillness and immortality which the looking-glass
conferred."[17]

   "The Lady in the Looking-glass" has aptly been inter-
preted not only as a metaphor of artistic and literary crea-
tivity[18] (a line of thought that goes at least as far back as
Plato's mirror simile), but also as a demonstration of the
unknowability of the inner person. While agreeing with
these views, I believe that the temporal dimensions repre-
sented in the text deserve more careful attention than they
have received so far. Woolf's short story can be read as an
investigation into the metaphysical question of the reach-
ability of being—and such investigation implies looking
into the immovable reality of the eternal, as opposed to the
constant flux of becoming of everyday lives. According
to Teresa Prudente, the moments of meditation, reflection,
and rapture in Woolf's production "always imply a set
of radical changes in both the temporal and spatial per-
ception" of the subject.[19] With this in mind, and building
upon Umberto Eco's theoretical speculations, I propose
looking at "The Lady in the Looking-glass" as a starting

---

16   Ibid.
17   Ibid., 47.
18   See, for instance, Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short
Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1992), 87-88.
19   Teresa Prudente, *A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity:
Virginia Woolf and the Experience of Time* (Plymouth: Lexington
Books, 2009), 3.

point for a broader discussion of the pervasive and varied use of images of mirrors in Woolf's production.

Mirrors as illusions of eternity

Umberto Eco defines mirrors as loci where "perception—thought—self-consciousness—experience with mirrors—semiosis seem to be the points of a rather inextricable knot, the points of a circle where it would be difficult to spot a starting point."[20] Indeed, the perfect, still and closed temporal dimension of Isabella's mirror could be spatially represented through a circle, which has no beginning and no end—incidentally, a concept which fits the structural circularity of the story and the sense of recursivity that presides it. According to Eco, the mirror, together with the circle, is an "absolute icon"[21] and is profoundly connected to the semiotic dream of nouns (proper names in particular) being directly and immediately linked to their referents. As Eco further states, this dream, "[…] just like the semiotic dream of an image having all the properties of the object they refer to […] arises from a sort of *catoptric nostalgia*."[22]

"The Lady in the Looking-glass" expresses a similar semiotic dream because the observer seeks to receive from the mirror an image of Isabella that corresponds to her substantial truth. In addition, an attempt to find a relation between mirror images and words is suggested whenever the narrator ironically reduces the figurative to the literal, abandoning any displacement of meaning involved in the language of indirect representation: "One must put oneself in [Isabella's] shoes. If one took the phrase literally, it was

---

20   Umberto Eco, "Mirrors," in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 203. Original emphasis.

21   Ibid., 212.

22   Ibid., 212, original emphasis.

easy to see the shoes in which she stood, down in the lower garden, at this moment. They were very narrow and long and fashionable—they were made of the softest and most flexible leather."[23]

In Woolf's production, the mirror theme is often accompanied by the catoptric dream of language reflecting its object in a direct way. For instance, in *Between the Acts* (1941), Isa is sitting at a dressing table musing on her platonic relationship with a local married man when she realises that she cannot find the right word to describe her sensations. It is in the mirror that she starts searching for such word:

> She returned to her eyes in the looking-glass. "In love," she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating—she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away.[24]

Isa never finds the word that she is looking for, but, as Karen Susan Jacobs remarks, she shows "her preference for the visual evidence of the looking glass" and reconfigures language "imagistically," adopting a physical rather than linguistic frame of reference.[25] Since mirrors "name"

---

23   Woolf, "The Lady," 48.
24   Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 14-15.
25   Karen Susan Jacobs, *Engendering the Gaze: Modernist Fictions of the Viewing Subject* PhD Diss. (Berkeley: University

only the specific object standing in front of them, which Eco defines as their "image *referent*,"[26] in Woolf's texts they also inspire (unfulfilled) dreams of identifying specific, unique referents in discourse.

"The Lady in the Looking-glass" seems to combine a desire of unequivocal correspondence between thought and expression with an aspiration to grasp the completeness and wholeness of the self when "drawn in and arranged and composed and made part of [a] picture"[27]—in other words, in a state of permanence that is removed from the fragmentation of everyday life and disengaged from the flow of becoming. The unifying power of reflected images seems to offer privileged access to what Prudente defines as "a different and meaningful dimension,"[28] as is the case with *Mrs Dalloway*:

> Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—[…] seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself.[29]

The reflection in the glass captures a fleeting moment of Clarissa's life, transforms her into a static portrait allowing appreciation of "the whole of her," and leads to novel realisation and self-consciousness. The text recreates the perceptual and cognitive synthesis through which

---

of California, 1992), 105.

26   Eco, "Mirrors," original emphasis.
27   Woolf, "The Lady," 47.
28   Prudente, *A Specially Tender Piece*, 4.
29   Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*. In *Collected Novels of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stella McNichol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 59.

Mrs Dalloway takes in the "new reality"[30] of her mirrored image by describing a process of gradual or deferred recognition. The dynamics of such a process proceed in stages, verbally rendered by a movement from objective, non-specific language to specific and subjective language ("the woman […] Clarissa Dalloway […] herself").

Similarly, in "The Lady in the Looking-glass," the observer interprets a mirrored image in successive phases. The passage configures the dynamism of perceptual experience, conceived as a merging of interior and exterior concurrences:

> A large black form loomed into the looking-glass; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets veined with pink and grey, and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered. For the moment it was unrecognisable and irrational and entirely out of focus. One could not relate these tablets to any human purpose. And then by degrees some logical process set to work on them and began ordering and arranging them and bringing them into the fold of common experience. One realised at last that they were merely letters. The man had brought the post.[31]

Here, the delay between the registering of sensory impressions and their interpretation is especially pronounced. Perception progresses from a new entity, which has not yet been clearly identified or fully focused upon ("a large black form," "marble tablets"), to a rendering of that same object as 'given' in a particular frame after it has been correctly identified or named through a "logical process." In fact, the objects of perception are re-organised in the

30   Ibid., 47.
31   Woolf, "The Lady," 47.

observer's mind through a conceptual activity involving what might be called, in Kantian terms, *a priori* concepts.

The narrator eschews any responsibility for the moment of incomprehension by stating that "the picture," rather than their perception of it, "was entirely altered;" in so doing, they suggest that the images reflected in the mirror can be unreliable. The postman episode, therefore, introduces a question concerning the ability of mirrors to distort reality and produce illusions. Woolf seems to rely on the traditional metaphorical ambiguity of mirrors: as Paola Splendore remarks, they can be either a symbol of perfect and unaltered reproduction of reality or its opposite, a source of bewitchment and deception.[32] Angela, the protagonist of "A Woman's College from Outside" (1920), is the victim of such deception as, while looking in a square mirror, she finds that

> [t]he whole of her was perfectly delineated—perhaps the soul. For the glass held up an untrembling image— white and gold, red slippers, pale hair with blue stones in it, and never a ripple or shadow to break the smooth kiss of Angela and her reflection in the glass, as if she were glad to be Angela. […] Strange indeed to have this visible proof of the rightness of things; this lily floating flawless upon Time's pool, fearless, as if this were sufficient—this reflection. Which meditation she betrayed by turning, and the mirror held nothing at all, or only the brass bedstead, and she, running here and there, patting, and darting, became like a woman in a house, and changed again.[33]

---

32   Paola Splendore, "Lo specchio vuoto e lo specchio infranto. Riflessi del reale nell'opera di Virginia Woolf," *Anglistica* 29/3 (1986): 127.

33   Virginia Woolf, "A Woman's College from Outside," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 139.

The moment of permanence and wholeness is just illu-
sory, and the timeless perfection of Angela's reflection is
but fleeting: both time and the mirror become "a pool," a
surface which is inherently changeable and anamorphic—
an idea I will return to shortly.

If some mirrors are especially conceived to generate
false impressions, all of them reproduce the surrounding
world only in appearance, producing a reflected image
that does not actually exist. Thus, the time dimension of
"stillness" and "immortality"[34] contained in Angela's and
Isabella's looking glasses is just a virtual sign, an illusion
of eternity where the fragmented, disordered real world is
momentarily "arranged and composed,"[35] or given a fac-
titious order and unity.

The ability to produce optical artifice implied in the
virtuality of the mirror is compared by Eco to a sort of
theatrical performance because mirrors, he says, "might
create a true semiosic situation, a tale, a fiction, a doxastic
concoction."[36] In this sense, reflecting surfaces are close-
ly connected to artistic production and fictional telling,
as in "The Lady in the Looking-glass," where the mirror
becomes a metafictional device. Annalisa Federici writes:
"as [it] arranges the various scenes by determining what
to include in its own frame, it also parallels the delimit-
ing frame of the short story itself, since what the mirror
does not capture the narrative excludes."[37] More specifi-
cally, the mirror, its frame, and its function in the story re-
mind us of Woolf's description of moments of being in "A
Sketch of the Past" (1939), where they are said to "cut out"

---

34   Woolf, "The Lady," 46.
35   Ibid., 47.
36   Eco, "Mirrors," 220.
37   Annalisa Federici, "'To Snap Us as We Are:' The
Implied Camera in Virginia Woolf's 'The Lady in the Looking-
Glass: A Reflection,'" *Annali di Ca' Foscari, Serie occidentale*
49 (2015): 170.

a scene and leave "a circle" of it available for thought,[38] capturing an elusive, passing moment in a seemingly perfect and eternal image.

Mirrors as instances of mutability

For Woolf, the uncertainty arising from mirrors depends especially on the duplicitous nature of the act of mirroring, which brings about similarity and difference with reality at the same time. Reflecting surfaces promise absolute truth but can create deceptive situations: although the reflected image upholds the principle of verisimilitude, distortion and inversion are part of its nature. Transfiguration, in fact, is a characteristic of mirroring and does not imply that the mirror is lying.[39]

Under such conditions, it might be impossible to distinguish distorted or transfigured images from 'real' ones, as suggested in the short story "The New Dress" (1925). Because of the looking-glass hung in the room where a party is held, Mabel has a sudden realisation that her outfit is inappropriate, "hideous,"[40] and experiences deep "humiliation and agony and self-loathing."[41] She feels guilty because, previously, in the dressmaker's workroom, another mirror returned a positive image of her, the semblance of "a beautiful woman,"[42] so she dwelled upon "an orgy of

---

38   Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex: Chatto and Windus for Sussex University Press, 1976), 79.

39   Eco, "Mirrors," 216-217.

40   Virginia Woolf, "The New Dress," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 164.

41   Ibid., 168.

42   Ibid., 166.

self-love, which deserved to be chastised."[43] Indeed, Mabel
believes that other partygoers "would like her to drown"
like Narcissus in the "dreadfully showing-up blue pool"
of the reflecting glass.[44] Even if she seems convinced that
"*This* was true, this drawing-room, this self, and the other
false,"[45] there remains an open question about which of
Mabel's reflected selves is the "true" one. As in Angela's
case, both reflections could be true at different moments
and in different dimensions of time: when at the dress-
maker's, Mabel caught "just for a second" a transfixed
revelation of "the core of herself, the soul of herself" as
an image of timeless beauty. Later, "the whole thing had
vanished,"[46] time resumed its flow and her previous ap-
pearance altered itself due to the instability or discontinu-
ity of selfhood in the ever-moving world. Mirrors, thus,
once again deny that the sense of sight may be able to fix
a stable and reliable image of reality outside the flux of
becoming.

In addition, at the party Mabel sees herself through the
gaze of the other, which is perceived as violent, judgmen-
tal, and alienating. The destructive effects of a spying or
maliciously observing eye associated with the mirror is a
central preoccupation also in "The Lady in the Looking-
glass," where the narrator warns, "People should not leave
looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they
should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some
hideous crime."[47] Since mirrors can disclose one's inner-
most secrets, their potential danger becomes actual only
in the presence of the inquisitive gaze of the other, when
the reflection's intrusive power can be used as an instru-
ment of control and censorship. It is, in fact, the scrutiny

43   Ibid., 165.
44   Ibid., 167-168.
45   Ibid., 166; original emphasis.
46   Ibid., 166.
47   Woolf, "The Lady," 46.

of a mysterious observer and of some fashionable guests at a party that, after reducing Isabella and Mabel to passive objects of examination, determines their dissolution and demise. In both texts, moreover, mentions of "hideous crime[s]"[48] and "foolish" actions[49] suggest that mirrors are closely associated with fault and guilt.

In the autobiographical "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf relates how shame, along with "[a] strong feeling of guilt" seemed "naturally attached" to looking at her own reflection in the mirror when she was a little girl.[50] This recollection, variously interpreted through the lens of Woolf's life history, sheds new light on a recurring theme of her fictional production, a constant desire of self-love perceived as either forbidden or hard to fulfil. As emerges from the references to pools and drowning in the descriptions of both Angela and Mabel's experience with the deceitfulness of mirrors, the thematic field of self-love is rich in allusions to the myth of Narcissus, which Woolf explores by intertwining its different traditions. "A Woman's College from Outside" and "The Dress" seem to draw inspiration chiefly from Ficino's and Plotinus' versions of the myth; deeply influenced by Plato, Ficino and Plotinus see Narcissus as an anti-tragic symbol of self-love, who misguidedly pursues the material beauty of the body rather than the Idea, the essence of beauty itself, which is the

---

48   Ibid.

49   Woolf, "The New Dress," 165.

50   Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 68. Woolf also talked about the danger she perceived in the mirror in a sort of dream, or vision: "I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. Was I looking in the glass one day when something in the background moved, and seemed to me alive? I cannot be sure. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me" (Ibid., 69).

only goodness.[51] On the other hand, "The Lady in the Looking-glass" exploits mainly Ovid's myth of Narcissus in the *Metamorphoses*, an anti-Platonic tale conveying a tragic conception of life, according to which knowledge can merely lead to the awareness that absolute truth does not exist.

Interestingly, even Pausanias's account of the myth is hinted at in Woolf's production. In this version, Narcissus had an identical twin sister; after she died, he started contemplating his own reflection in the water so that he had the impression of looking at her again, in wilful self-deception. As Martin Bergmann notes, Pausanias introduces the theme of Hermaphroditus into that of Narcissus[52] for the young man embodies, or desires to embody both sexes simultaneously. It is not surprising, thus, that the protagonist of Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) entertains a special relationship with mirrors:

> Then laying her pen aside she went into her bedroom, stood in front of her mirror, and arranged her pearls about her neck. [...] What woman would not have kindled to see what Orlando saw then burning in the snow—for all about the looking glass were snowy lawns, and she was like a fire, a burning bush, and the candle flames about her head were silver leaves; or again, the glass was green water, and she a mermaid, slung with pearls, a siren in a cave, singing so that oarsmen leant from their boats and fell down, down to embrace her; so dark,

---

51   Incidentally, Ficino re-reads, in the same vein, the Hermetic tradition of Pimander, who reveals to Trismegistus how the immortal man assumed a mortal form after falling in love with his own image reflected in the water; this cosmogony explains why the essence of human beings still contains a sparkle of eternity and immortality.

52   Martin S. Bergmann, "The Legend of Narcissus," *American Imago* 41/4 (1984): 390.

so bright, so hard, so soft, was she, so astonishingly se-
ductive that it was a thousand pities that there was no
one there to put it in plain English.[53]

Like Narcissus, Orlando possesses a wondrous beau-
ty and gives over to the seductive power of the mirror,
abandoning her writing-table to contemplate her own im-
age. The fact that no one could "put […] in plain English"
Orlando's splendour might be a reference to Echo, the
nymph who, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, was
unable to produce coherent speech and fell in love with
Narcissus. The "green water" simile, moreover, emphasis-
es that Orlando's mirror is as fluid as Narcissus's pool, and
as such it does not return a unified, static image but a flow
of juxtaposed pictures, in which opposite qualities coexist
("so dark, so bright, so hard, so soft").

The instability and precariousness of Orlando's reflec-
tion somehow re-enacts Narcissus's tragic experience,
that is, the inability to fix his own image in the water, and
the impossibility of joining with it to reach the wholeness
of his own being. Starting with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,
water mirrors have been a symbol of both transformation
and anamorphosis as they express a twofold character of
time:[54] they offer an illusion of permanence and symbol-
ise the desire of fixing an imperturbable image of reality,

---

53   Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, edited by Michael H.
Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 109.

54   Ovid often copes with the question of time and its dif-
ferent conceptions in *Metamorphoses*; see, for instance, Book
XV: "A universe where nothing stays the same, / Sea, sky, wind,
earth, and time forever changing—/ Time like a river in its cease-
less motion, / On, on, each speeding hour cannot stand still, / But
as waves, thrust by waves, drive waves before them, / So time
runs first or follows forever new: / The flying moment gone,
what once seemed never / Is now, which vanishes before we say
it, / Each disappearing moment in a cycle, / Each loss replaced

yet they consist of a restless and changeable substance. So, while suggesting the idea of eternity, they also represent its opposite, the constant flow of becoming. In Woolf's production, this aporia regarding water mirrors is found, for instance, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), where similar images convey opposite ideas: dreams are said to persist steadily "[i]n those mirrors, the minds of men," which are "pools of uneasy water."[55] However, later, it is in a "pool of thought" that Lily witnesses the dissolution of "the whole world."[56]

The day after having completed "The Lady in the Looking-glass," Woolf started writing the short story "The Fascination of the Pool" (1929), a title that clearly evokes narcissistic associations. Yet, unexpectedly, the story turns the narcissistic glance outwards, as the pool does not return the image of the (mysterious) narrator, who is gazing in its depths. It shows something different, something other than the reflecting self: the faces of people "who had gone away,"[57] but whose thoughts live on in the water. The sense of optic uncertainty inherent in all mirrors is emphasised in the watery reflection, which is especially deceitful to the human eye: the pool "may have been very deep,"[58] and a "white placard" mirrored on its surface seems to float on it. The "darkness" caused by a "fringe of rushes"[59] calls to mind Ovid's description of the thick

---

within the living hour," Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, edited by Horace Gregory (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), 428.

55   Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* in *Collected Novels of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stella McNichol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 278.

56   Ibid*.,* 312.

57   Virginia Woolf, "The Fascination of the Pool," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 220.

58   Ibid.

59   Ibid.

grass and vegetation that prevents the sun from shedding light on Narcissus's pool,[60] wrapping it in an obscurity which not only contributes to visual deception, but also hides any sign of passing time.

In "The Fascination of the Pool," once again the pool-mirror becomes a dimension of non-time, where past and present converge: it "held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied."[61] As if it were a catoptromantic mirror, the pool presents to the observer's eye a sequence of voices and stories from the past, a flux that seems to have no unifying principle and no end:

> One drew closer to the pool and parted the reeds so that one could see deeper, through the reflections, through the faces, through the voices to the bottom. But there under the man who had been to the Exhibition; and the girl who had drowned herself and the boy who had seen the fish; and the voice which cried alas alas! yet there was always something else. There was always another face, another voice. One thought came and covered another.[62]

The "liquid thoughts," in fact, "stick together" and "form recognisable people," but "just for a moment."[63] Each identity, only apparently fixed throughout eternity in the pool, quickly dissolves before the observer's eyes, revealing its instability. In this sense, "The Fascination of the Pool" adds to the interpretation of the other mirrors and reflecting surfaces proposed so far; the story suggests, borrowing Jesse Matz's expression, that for Woolf "people

---

60   Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 77.
61   Woolf, "The Fascination," 220.
62   Ibid., 221.
63   Ibid., 220.

are collections of different selves,"[64] entities in a constant state of flux, who vary according to different times and circumstances and "shift and change and [are] seen through in a second."[65]

Reflecting surfaces express a nostalgia, or a disappointed hope of reuniting with an absolute and unchanging ideal of the self. All they seem to offer is a fleeting and narcissistic gratification of self-recognition; however, they also provide a counter to the dangers of self-absorption or sensorial certainty because of their inherent power of anamorphosis and transformation. Characters such as Isabella, Angela, Mabel, and especially Orlando only exist in multiplicity, like the reflections in "The Fascination of the Pool," as they constantly change on a physical, mental, or emotional level; their temporary selves can be captured by the heterochrony of the mirror, but their different beings, just like the different time dimensions they experience, do not amount to any single, conclusive form. In this frame of thought, identity and alterity are impossible to tell apart because the whole structure of reality becomes unstable, as happens with Narcissus: both innocent and guilty, "himself the worshipped and the worshipper,"[66] he wonders: "Am I the lover / Or beloved?."[67]

---

64   Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175.

65   Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, in *Collected Novels of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stella McNichol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 358.

66   Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 77.

67   Ibid., 78.

Annalisa Volpone

MODERNIST PLATH

Introduction

This essay addresses the topic of "temporalities of modernism" through the example of Sylvia Plath, whose only novel *The Bell Jar* presents a significant continuity with some of the major features of modernist style. Published with the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas, on January 14th, 1963, a few months before her death, the novel reveals remarkable convergences with modernism, hence positing the question of whether/when such a movement has really come to an end, considering its persistence in later and contemporary novels. Indeed, the rendering of the characters' consciousness (in particular of the protagonist Esther Greenwood) along with the challenging presence of a narrator—whose reliability needs to be proved and reassessed as the novel unfolds—, and the way realist details are absorbed into the characters' inner perception, establish a direct and strong connection to modernism.

Between September and November 1952, when Plath is in her sophomore year majoring in English, she reads and studies the most prominent modernist authors. Both her letters and journals of the period offer an invaluable source of information about her reading choices and insights. The years 1952 and 1953 are also marked by personal and professional experiences which will result in the autobiographical references in *The Bell Jar*. For instance, in 1952 Plath dates Dick Norton, who will be the model for Buddy Willard, Esther Greenwood's fiancé. In 1953 Plath is the recipient of a scholarship that gives her the opportunity to work as a guest editor for the fashion

magazine *Mademoiselle* in New York. This will provide much of the material for the plot and for the psychological development of the protagonist who also wins a fashion magazine contest for an editorial internship.

According to Linda Wagner-Martin, as early as 1952 one can find passages in her short stories that recall *The Bell Jar* from both a narrative and stylistic perspective.[1] From her journal, in particular, we understand how any emotional situation can virtually become material for the novel. It seems that Plath's inspiration as a poet is consistent with her lifelong project to write a novel that challenges autobiographical narratives from their very foundations. As a matter of fact, when Plath thinks of her career and her future success, she imagines she will eventually be among "the poetesses, the authoresses"[2] she admires most, the two roles being in her view interchangeable and complementary, although prose gives her more freedom, and allows her to use time differently: "a poem every ten days. Prose sustains me. I can mess it, mush it, rewrite it, pick it up any times—rhythms are slacker, more variable, it doesn't die so soon."[3] To Plath "a poem is the moment's monument,"[4] whereas a novel can linger and expand more on the development of a character.

Modernism attracts Plath on various levels, among her favourite authors one could mention D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka. However, as significant and important these authors might be for her development as a novelist, it is to Woolf and

---

1   Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath. A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999). See also, by the same author, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 60-61.

2   Karen V. Kukil (ed.), *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 327.

3   Ibid., 315.

4   Ibid., 268.

Joyce that Plath looks at with particular attention as major reference points for the writing of *The Bell Jar*.

Very often Plath compares her emotional and creative status to Woolf's, for instance on February 25, 1957, in a time of particular frustration in terms of inspiration, she writes:

> And just now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf which I bought with a battery of her novels saturday with Ted […] Bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her—from reading Mrs. Dalloway for Mr. Crockett. […] But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn't drown. I suppose I'll always be over-vulnerable, slightly paranoid. But I'm also so damn healthy & resilient. And apple-pie happy. Only I've got to write. I feel sick, this week, of having written nothing lately. The Novel got to be such a big idea, I got panicked.[5]

Not only does this entry prove Plath's commitment to her novel many years before its publication, but also, and more interestingly, it connects her writing to Woolf's, whom she considers a model both for her style and as a professional woman writer. (Notice that Plath writes the word *novel* with capital "N" in recognition of the importance of her project). Undoubtedly to Plath, Woolf is the paradigm of the woman who succeeded in turning her talent and creativity into a profession by even founding a publishing house. It should be noted that Plath, as a Fullbrighter, studied in the UK at Newnham College in Cambridge, the same college in which Woolf gave her lecture in 1928 on "Women and Fiction," which inspired the writing of *A Room of One's Own*, a book that Plath owned in her Newnham library. Then of course there is

---

5   Ibid., 269.

the inescapable issue of Woolf's suicide which Plath mentions in the above entry, and which is the object of many reflections in her diary. "Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide?," she asks in November 1953, three months after her first failed suicide attempt. Certainly, Plath's insistence on Woolf's suicide shows a connection also on a more personal level, as if Woolf were posing her very same questions and facing similar psychological suffering.

As for Joyce, she is fascinated by his prose. In her journal she describes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as "word-encanting, descanting."[6] What interests Plath most in Joyce's writing is how he can make the process of artistic creation visible and at the same time eminently mysterious. *The Bell Jar* is not just the account of Esther Greenwood's journey to adulthood, it is also a reflection on writing, on *novel* writing at the end of the 50s. In this regard, Joyce's revolution of the novel, his deconstruction of traditional narratives inspires Plath to defy what was expected from a woman in her time to write. She wants Esther to be alive and real, rejecting the idea of turning her into a female model fitting for a commonplace book. Further, as I shall argue later, Joyce is part of the very texture of *The Bell Jar* as it is the topic of Esther Greenwood's thesis, an author she needs to come to terms with in order to become a writer herself.

One could argue that Plath's fascination with Woolf and Joyce is also enhanced by their proximity to poetry. As for Woolf, a continuity could be detected between her notion of a "moment of being" and Plath's aforementioned definition of poetry as a "moment's monument." As Woolf describes them in *A Sketch of the Past*, moments of being are heightened experiences, in which the subject feels with extraordinary intensity and awareness. It is indeed in those moments that Woolf's language approaches poetry.

---

6   Ibid., 321.

According to Jeanette Winterson: "When Woolf is read and taught, she needs to be read and taught as a poet; she is not a writer who uses for words things, for her, words are things, incantatory, substantial."[7] Indeed, Woolf's precision and the evocativeness of her prose can be compared to Plath's poetry and to her urge to get into the very essence of life without any rhetorical embellishment. In a letter to her mother dated February 2, 1955, Plath describes the much longed-for change in her poetry as a "victory over word nuances and a superfluity of adjectives."[8]

Regarding Joyce, poetry is not just another side of his writing (the musicality of his prose can be easily associated to poetry). Joyce is also a poet in the sense that he actually writes poems. Plath admired his collection of poems *Chamber Music* (1907). In her journal she mentions "I hear an army charging upon the land," and quotes the "final irrevocable lines" asking herself "If I were a man, I could write a novel about this; being a woman, why must I only cry and freeze, cry and freeze?"[9] It is interesting that Joyce's lines trigger Plath to think about a novel (not a poem) and the difficulties of writing and being read as a woman, the gender issue playing a decisive role in Plath's works.

The following sections discuss the modernist elements of *The Bell Jar* and the influence that Woolf and Joyce exerted on its writing and on Plath's consideration of herself as a writer. Although the novel belongs to a post-modernist era, its indebtedness to some of the most challenging modernist narrative strategies is quite overt. I investigate the way Plath relates to Woolf and Joyce, how she positions

---

7   Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects. Essay on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 70.

8   Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 16.

9   Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 286.

herself between them, how she challenges their writing and eventually "begin[s] to speak […] [her] inner self."[10]

"I shall go better than she": Woolf and writing in the feminine

Sylvia Plath engaged in a life-long intellectual conversation with Virginia Woolf. Not only is she, together with Joyce, her major reference point as a writer, but she is also the paradigm of a woman who has successfully turned her talent into a profession. Unlike other modernist authors whom Plath mentions in her journal, her fascination with Woolf is more complex as it touches many different aspects of her life. She feels close to Woolf for her reading habits, the rigor of her self-education, the precision in scheduling her days according to her reading and writing activities (we know that Plath was obsessed with productivity planning). But mostly she admired her determination in finding her place in the literary arena despite the difficulties and limits resulting from gender inequality. Woolf is to Plath everything she wants to achieve and eventually supersede. Indeed, on July 17, 1957, when she is only 25, thinking about Woolf she affirms "I shall go better than she," as evidence of her extreme ambition to surpass one of the most celebrated writers of the twentieth century. Plath "uses" Woolf as a term of comparison: it is through her professional and private vicissitudes that she measures hers. Like Woolf, she wants to become a great writer (she envisions herself as a remarkable "authoress and poetess" and, as I will argue later, she doesn't want to choose between the two), but unlike her, she is determined to defeat her own depression and have children. Before all that, however, she needs to learn from Woolf, for this reason she reads "a battery" of her novels and her "blessed

---

10   Ibid.*,* 286.

diary,"[11] which, one suspects, does have an impact on the configuration of her own journal. As it will also be the case with Joyce, the indicator of Plath's deep understanding of Woolf's aesthetics is her ability to appropriate it in her own writing and make it hers, so that her narratives somehow morph into Woolf's. In this regard, her consistent use of punctuation (in particular of columns), as well as her habit of beginning a new sentence with the adversative conjunction "but" in her journal can be seen as quite evident hallmarks of Woolf's style. For instance, the entry dated February 25, 1957, is completely devoted to Woolf, and her style is recognisably Woolfian: "*But* first*:* some quick notes on the present island. […] But I biked to town today to shop: bank, P. O. […] But: I know & feel & have lived so much and am so wise, yes, in living for my age*:* having blasted through conventional morality, and come to my own morality."[12]

If one compares Plath's notes with Woolf's style in *To the Lighthouse*, there are remarkable analogies although the texts are different in intention and function: "*But* why repeat this over and over again? Why be always trying to bring up some feeling she had not got? There was a kind of blasphemy in it. It was all dry*:* all withered*:* all spent."[13]

Plath needs Woolf to shape the form of her imagination. In this regard, her journal is not just a place to write and put her thoughts in order, it is also a testing ground in which Esther Greenwood's expressions of enthusiasm and anxiety about life in general and her future in particular are first formulated, being Esther, her fictional alter ego. Because, as we mentioned, the writing of *The Bell Jar* is a lifelong activity to Plath, the creative nucleus of the novel can be found scattered throughout her journal. It is here indeed that she notes about those life and death drives

---

11   Ibid., 269.
12   Ibid., 289. Italics mine.
13   Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 124. Italics mine.

that so strongly echo those embodied by Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway.* On closer examination, Esther Greenwood's dualistic attitude towards New York (whereby the city represents both the very essence of life and its opposite) is consistent with what Clarissa and Septimus feel about London. In other words, Woolf's verbal translation of the psychic life of her characters strongly impacts on Plath's rendering of Esther's psychological dimension, especially in a time in which she still has to find her own voice as a novelist: "What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough."[14]

On July 20, 1957, in a moment of professional uncertainty, Plath writes in her journal: "Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible. I find myself describing episodes: you don't have to follow your Judith Greenwood to breakfast, lunch, dinner, or tell about her train rides, unless the flash forwards her, reveals her. Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: she is the white goddess."[15] Plath is particularly interested in Woolf's choice of not revealing too much about her characters, letting them speak for themselves. On 17 July 1957 she records in her journal having "underlined & underlined" her copy of *The Waves.* This is a novel deeply intertwined with poetry, Woolf herself defined it both as a "novel-poem" and a "play-poem," as a result of her on-going challenge to literary genres. Again in 1957 a few months earlier than the previous journal entry, considering the very structure of *The Bell Jar*, Plath imagines how she could render the story of this young woman and her battle against depression: "Close to a prose-poem of balanced, cadenced words and meanings, of street-corners and lights and people but not merely romantic, nor merely cariacature [sic], not merely a diary: not, ostensibly, autobiography: in one year

---

14   Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 315.

15   Ibid., 289. Plath calls Esther Greenwood "Judith" in her initial plan for *The Bell Jar*.

I must so douse this experience in my mind, imbue it with distance, create cool shrewd views of it, so that it becomes reshapen."[16]

The "prose-poem" Plath would like to create allows writing to morph into poetry, thus challenging the novel as Woolf has done ("how does Woolf do it?" she asks herself in the same entry), although her context and purposes are different. It seems that only a prose poem can actually render the psychic experience of the characters as Woolf was able to do: "that almost sexless, neurotic luminousness— the catching of the objects: chairs, tables & the figures on a street corner, and the infusion of radiance: a shimmer of the plasm that is life."[17] I find particularly interesting Plath's insistence on a form of narrative that has to be at the same time transparent, luminous and intense, a light that attracts attention, this is the most important lesson she takes from Woolf. Indeed Plath's notes seem to echo Woolf's major statement about modern writing when in her breakthrough essay, "Modern Fiction" (1919), she speaks of "flashes of significance" and most famously of life "as a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."[18] What a writer can do is to follow life, get as close as possible to it, no matter how incoherent and disconnected the process may seem. Accordingly, *The Bell Jar* is a journey through Esther Greenwood's life as she perceives it through those events encapsulated in the familiar and social context that both mark her personal and professional development and eventually concur to her depression and suicide attempts.

The Bell Jar is not a modernist novel in the sense that it presents a narration only from the psychological

---

16   Ibid., 341 (March 1, 1957).
17   Ibid., 342.
18   Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *The Common Reader First Series* (http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300031h.html#C12 last accessed 11.09.20).

perspective of the protagonist, it is modernist because it centres on the psychological response of the protagonist to the events that shape a particular time of her life. It is Plath's concern about effectively representing the psychic life of Esther Greenwood that makes her turn to modernist writers. From them she learns how objects such as chairs, tables can be part of a character's mindscape and shape the very forms of his/her thought.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf pays particular attention to the psychological meaning of clothes. Indeed, in the "Time passes" section of the novel, clothes confirm and make Mrs Ramsay's death tangible. Those clothes she used to wear are now hanging in the wardrobe, they are empty as Mrs Ramsay's body no longer fills them, precisely like Jacob's empty shoes in the last scene of *Jacob's Room*: "What people had shed and left—a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons."[19]

In *The Bell Jar*, one of the most intense scenes describes Esther throwing her fashionable New York clothes off the hotel rooftop. It is a gesture of freedom in her attempt to find a way out of the familiar and social constrictions. Esther needs to metaphorically die as the perfect girl and the future wife of a Yalie and reborn as her own person: "Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York."[20]

The image of the clothes given to the wind of the night and flying over New York "like a loved one's ashes" is like

---

19   Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925, 1992), 106.
20   Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 118.

a rite of passage, no longer the Esther who was trying to conform to others' expectations but a naked Esther who has to figure out which way to take. I find this particular passage eminently modernist and Woolfian, as the intensity of the moment is described through inanimate objects that become alive through the meaning they convey as mnemonic vectors. Like Mrs Ramsay's skirts and coats that still keep the shape of her body turning into evidence of her existence as well as her death, so Esther's dresses and scarfs as they fly away tell the story of a woman who lived and now is no more. Esther needs to get rid of those clothes for the memories and meaning they carry with themselves. This is also a funeral scene in anticipation of her suicide attempt. In *To the Lighthouse*, the description of Mrs Ramsay's clothes and the consequential acknowledgement of the death they bring with themselves can be read as a rite of passage as funerals are. In both texts clothes become a kind of *memento mori*, a further way of lingering on death.

Another convergence in Woolf's and Plath's narratives regards their relationship with doctors. They both feel the urge to translate their (traumatic) personal experiences into fiction. In Woolf's case the several negative medical experiences that occurred to her and her family fuelled her distrust of doctors. The incompetence of Dr. Rodriguez in understanding Rachel's disease in *The Voyage Out* is an example of this. Of course, the fictional quintessence of such a distrust is represented by the character of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*. Many points in his decisive conversation with Dr. Bradshaw, a few hours before his suicide, echo real conversations Woolf had with the psychiatrists who tried to treat her mental issues. (Between the lines there is also a criticism on masculine authority imposed on fragile and weak patients. Compared to Dr. Bradshaw, Septimus is a depotentiated man, with a possible homosexual drive for his dead companion Evans). Dr.

Bradshaw's infamous advice to Septimus, "rest, rest, rest," well illustrates the superficial approach that quite a significant number of psychiatrists had on treating their patients. In 1904, Dr. Savage forced Woolf to leave London and stay in Cambridge with her aunt Caroline Emelia. This is how she describes her condition in a letter to her friend Violet Dickinson:

> London means my home, and books, and pictures, and music, from all of which I have been parted since February now,—and I have never spent such a wretched 8 months in my life. And yet that tyrannical, and as I think, shortsighted Savage insists upon another two. I told him when I saw him that the only place I can be quiet and free is in my own home, with Nessa: she understands my moods, and lets me alone in them, whereas with strangers like Nun [one of the nicknames for her aunt] I have to explain every random word—and it is so exhausting. I long for a large room to myself, with books and nothing else, where I can shut myself up, and see no one, and read myself into peace. This would be possible at Gordon Sq. and nowhere else. I wonder why Savage doesn't see this. As a matter of fact my sleep hasn't improved a scrap since I have been here, and his sleeping draught gives me a headache, and nothing else.[21]

The discomfort Woolf expresses in this letter can be compared to Plath's and her hospitalisation at the McLeon Hospital in Belmont (Mass.), which occurred in 1953 after she became depressed and received bipolar electroconvulsive shock treatments. Obviously, Plath's experience was more traumatic and invasive than Woolf's, but she too

---

21   Virginia Woolf, Letter to Violet Dickinson qtd. in Stephen Trombley, *Virginia Woolf and Her Doctors*, PhD Diss. (University of Nottingham, 1980), 98.

couldn't really see any advantage in being hospitalised. Unlike Woolf, however, Plath could trust her psychiatrist (perhaps the only doctor she actually could talk to) Ruth Beuscher. In *The Bell Jar*, psychiatrists don't seem to be particularly insightful in treating their patients' mental issues. Exploring their response to Esther's mental breakdown and those of other characters like Joan, who eventually commits suicide, Plath is very critical of the medical protocol used for mental issues and of the way they addressed patients' needs. That said, I think that the most striking example of Plath's criticism on the medical field comes from an episode that it is not connected to mental disorder, rather it somehow echoes Plath's miscarriage, which had an impact on the writing of the novel. I'm referring to the childbirth scene in the sixth chapter of the novel, when Esther visits Buddy at Yale Medical School. She seems interested in medicine and he shows her cadavers, foetuses in jars, and then they go to see a baby being born. The scene is strongly marked by gender discrimination, the woman in labour is left to the care of doctors and assistants, all male, nobody is really concerned about her. Buddy tells Esther that she's been given a drug and would not remember her pain:

> I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.[22]

22   Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 69.

Esther seems to think that childbirth, as men conceived of it, is devised in such a way that enhances women's pain instead of relieving it. The table the woman is put on "looked like some awful torture table"[23] and her "stomach was so high I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all."[24] Such a view makes Esther wonder whether there were "other ways to deliver babies."[25]

Plath's personal experience is certainly at the basis of her discourse on mental disease, suicide, and the inadequacy of medical response, which is often connected to gender bias. However, when it comes to translating it into fiction, Woolf provides a crucial example. The isotopies of depression and death that one could single out in *The Bell Jar* are connected to the way Woolf discusses mental disease, suicide, and medical care in her novels. She has set an example that Plath follows and, in a very (post) modernist way, makes her own adjusting it to her own aesthetic purpose. The narrative is Plath's, yet the mood and atmosphere lead us back to Woolf, showing how profoundly Plath appropriates her approach to life and fiction, making the two indistinguishable.

Joyce and the writing conundrum

Plath's fascination with Joyce begins with the character of Stephen Dedalus, his artistic inspiration and the psychological and emotional difficulties from *Portrait* to *Ulysses* could be compared with hers.[26] For instance, Stephen's troubled relation with a dead mother and a father who does not understand his talent, in a reversed way, does present

23   Ibid., 68.
24   Ibid., 69.
25   Ibid., 70.
26   On Plath's reading Joyce, see James Gorley, "The Same Anew: James Joyce's Modernism and Its Influence on Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *College Literature* 45/4 (2018): 695-723.

some analogies with Plath's own family issues. In her case there is a dead father, whose virtual presence keeps on haunting her throughout her life, and a mother with whom she has a love-hate relationship, considering her as the highest representative of a kind of domesticity that is attractive and repulsive at the same time.[27] However, Plath does not only look for the "accessible Joyce" (if there is such a thing as an "accessible Joyce"), she is also intrigued by that combination of linguistic ingeniousness and the incessant mechanism of meaning production that is *Finnegans Wake*. Remarkably, Plath's interest in the *Wake* develops precisely in those years in which Joycean scholars tried to approach the text no longer as a failure or Joyce's final oddity, but as a complex masterpiece, the ultimate challenge in the history of the novel. Indeed, besides the pioneering 1944 work by Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, a systematic study of the *Wake* had yet to be published.[28] It is remarkable that Plath refers to Campbell and Robinson whenever she discusses

---

27   The effects of such a tortured relationship could also be observed in her ambivalent attitude towards her role as a mother and as a housewife, who takes care of her husband by cooking for him (as a perfect incarnation of the 1950s ideal of femininity). In this regard, I would also mention Plath's annotations of Hughes' favourite dishes in her copy of Julia Child's bible of cooking *Mastering the French Art of Cooking* (1961).

28   One could mention Herbert Gorman, *James Joyce* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1939) (a study that does not focus on *Finnegans Wake*, but that could have helped Plath in having a general understanding of Joyce's momentum; some dissertation theses, which were probably unavailable to Plath such as Fred H. Higginson, *James Joyce's Revisions of* Finnegans Wake*: A Study of the Published Versions,* PhD Diss. (University of Minnesota, 1953); or a few years later the study of David Hayman, *A first-draft version of Finnegans Wake* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1963); John V Kelleher, "Notes on *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*," (*The Analyst* X, 1956).

Finnegans Wake, as if she were trying to understand the text with the tools at her disposal.

Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath seems to further develop her insights on the *Wake* and to ideally continue the research conducted for her dissertation thesis on the theme of the double, titled: "A Study of the Double in two of Dostoevsky's Novels," supervised by George Gibian and submitted on January 15th, 1955.[29] Plath planned to add a critical reading of the twins in *Finnegans Wake* and indeed on various occasions Esther mentions her intention to write her dissertation thesis on *Finnegans Wake* and in particular on the representation of the double in the twins Shem and Shaun: "I would spend my whole time writing on some obscure theme in the works of James Joyce. I hadn't picked out my theme yet, because I hadn't got round to reading *Finnegans Wake*, but my professor was very excited about my thesis and had promised to give me some leads on images about twins."[30]

In a crucial passage of *The Bell Jar*, Plath challenges the reader by incorporating some lines of the first page of *Finnegans Wake* in the text. Remarkably, Esther thinks about her thesis during the umpteenth night spent awaken, when not even the pills her psychiatrist gave her seem to work: "I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt dark and safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. It needed about a ton more weight to make me sleep."[31]

---

29   Plath herself was planning to include Joyce in her dissertation thesis: "In the middle of the summer, I will begin reading Joyce, so that I'll have a bulk read in time to begin thinking about the writing of my theses chapters, right at the beginning of the fall." (Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 545).

30   Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 35.

31   Ibid., 130.

Esther needs "some weight" in order to fall asleep (perhaps forever?), a weight that physically and emotionally annihilates her, prevents her from thinking, because only in a total absence of thought can she stop, let down her guard and yield to her body's urge to sleep. It is during such a night that she opens the *Wake*, whose title seems to be a tragic memento of her borderline psychological condition, as it turns her into the quintessential embodiment of Joyce's ideal reader, the one who suffers from perennial insomnia. As she starts reading, "the thick book made an unpleasant dent in my stomach,"[32] she attempts at an "auditory interpretation" of the page based on sounds (which also reveals a kind of poetic sensibility and further connects Esther to Plath herself). On reading the very incipit of the novel, the "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's…" she observes that "I thought the small letter at the start might mean that nothing ever really began all new, with a capital, but that it just flowed on from what came before. Eve and Adam's was Adam and Eve, of course, but it probably signified something else as well."[33]

However, it is the "voice of the thunder" that attracts Esther most: "My eyes sank through an alphabet soup of letters to the long word in the middle of the page."[34] As she reads, she notices that this long word is made of a hundred letters and that that number must have some hidden meaning. She tries the words aloud and "It sounded like a heavy wooden object falling downstairs, boomp boomp boomp, step after step. Lifting the pages of the book, I let them fan slowly by my eyes. Words, dimly familiar but twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse mirror, fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy surface of my brain."[35]

---

32   Ibid., 131.
33   Ibid.
34   Ibid.
35   Ibid.

Esther approaches the *Wake* in chapter ten, which re-cords one of the most difficult stages of her mental distress. It happens when her scholarship in New York is coming to an end and she has to choose the life, the career she wants to pursue. Esther finds out that she cannot really choose, she cannot tell which is better, which is more rewarding. She feels detached from her social environment, which (morally) obliges her to silence her talents in order to be a devoted wife and a loving mother. It seems impossible to be all, to be a poet and a writer, a wife and a mother. Esther remains on the edge of life, unable to step forward. In this regard, her attempt at reading the *Wake*, and making the (impossible) hermeneutic choice to give a meaning to each passage and turn the page, seems to stage at an intel-lectual, literary level the same question. Once again Esther finds herself unable to choose, she can only stare at the words, in a scene that is reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights*, when at the beginning of the novel a sleepless Lockwood is trying to decode the letters scratched into the paint on the ledge of the bed: "The letters grew barbs and rams' horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way. Then they associated themselves in fantastic, untranslatable shapes, like Arabic or Chinese."[36]

Endowed with a life of their own, those letters become signs she is unable to decode, they form mysterious and untranslatable shapes, signalling an ontological fissure between author and reader, a gap that both Esther and Plath are trying to fill as they need to partake in the artis-tic creative process. The more those letters enhance their semantic possibilities the more they become undecidable and loose. Those pulsating letters evoke Barthes' notion of hermeneutic code, as he explains it in *S/Z*.[37] Once the

---

36   Ibid., 131-132.
37   According to Barthes, the "hermeneutic code" is one of the five different kinds of semiotic elements that can be found

hermeneutic code is revealed, it becomes irreversible. The moment of cognition is permanent to the reader, not to choose that moment means to forever remain in the realm of possibility.

This is Esther's and Plath's major dilemma, the reading of the *Wake* perfectly epitomises the essence of their artistic *impasse*: "my writing, my desire to be many lives"—Plath writes in her diary entry of July 28th, 1950[38]— the impossibility of living many lives at the same time contrasts with the need to choose one life and stick to that. Such a condition connects also to the very topic of the thesis both Esther and Plath worked on, the double, the idea that life can only be understood as multiple and plural:

> I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited. [...] Perhaps you could trace my feeling back to my distaste at having to choose between alternatives. Perhaps that's why I want to be everyone—so no one can blame me for being I. So I won't have to take the responsibility for my own character development and philosophy.[39]

---

in a text. The hermeneutic code refers to any aspect of the text that raises questions in the reader by remaining mysterious and/or unexplained. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Blackwell, 2002), 31, 42.

38   Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 22. Plath is obsessed by the idea of embodying lives, of being able to embrace as many lives as she can: "millions of lives to assimilate before breakfast tomorrow" (Ibid., 26).

39   Ibid., 43-44.

Considerations like the above mentioned recur many times in Plath's journals and letters, they are at the basis of her creative process and the need to come back to the self, to the singularity after having explored multiplicity, from "twone" (I.1.3.12), to quote the *Wake*, to one.[40] In *The Bell Jar* such psychological fragmentation drives Esther to "the breaking point" and to the psychiatric hospital and electroshock therapy, after her attempt to take her life. Remarkably, as a poet-to-be, Esther's attention is drawn by the "poeticness" of the *Wake*, which, not by chance, opens with "riverrun," a quotation from Coleridge's 1816 poem "Kubla Khan."[41] At this stage of her life, Esther does not know whether she wants to be a writer or a poet, as she admits it for the first time in a conversation with Jay Cee, her supervisor at the magazine. Notably to Jay Cee's question about her future she replies with her resolution on reading Joyce and focusing on some obscure theme in his works, as we have just seen. Joyce is the perfect author for Esther, his obscurity and complexity match her state of mind. The *Wake* encapsulates all of her preoccupations and ambitions as a writer. Poetry and prose are combined through the use of a challenging language; on the one hand the omnipresence of an author, who continuously baffles the reader as he/she tries to decode the text, and on the other his abdication to the reader and his/her ability to produce meaning at each reading.

---

40   Incidentally, "twone" to an Italian reader echoes "tuono," "thunder."

41   Elsewhere I discussed the Coleridge-Joyce connection, with particular attention to *Finnegans Wake* (Annalisa Volpone, "'Sewing a dream together': Coleridge's Dream Vision and the *Wake*," in Giuseppina Cortese, Giuliana Ferreccio, Maria Teresa Giaveri, Teresa Prudente (eds.), *James Joyce: Whence, Whither and How Studies in Honour of Carla Vaglio* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2015), 475-485.

Indeed, the interplay between poetry and prose, within the "proteiform graph" she is reading, continues to puzzle Esther and, in a moment of complete dejection, she decides to "junk [her] thesis" and "become an ordinary English major."[42] In order to do that, we are told, she needs to take a course in the 18th century, which would link her again to Joyce, via Coleridge. It seems that the apparently un-decidable text she is confronting encapsulates her writing conundrum, her need to decide whether it has to be poetry or prose, as if on that decision depended the very integrity of her subjectivity. Such an impossible choice is directly connected to another modernist, namely D. H. Lawrence and his metaphor of the fig, which he proposes in *Women in Love*. The fig tree motif emerges in all its powerful echoicity, when Esther pictures herself faced with numer-ous choices: the options of marriage and children; success as a poet, professor or editor; success in Europe, Africa or South America. Spoiled for choice, Esther is unable to make a choice. Jay Cee later says of Esther at a pho-to shoot during which the young women are required to dress up to demonstrate where they have come from and what they aspire to be: "she wants ... to be everything."[43] Jo Gill reminds us of a prose essay Plath wrote titled "A Comparison," which opens with exclamation:

> 'How I envy the novelist!' (JP 56). It proceeds to list all the qualities of fiction writing—its capacity to incor-porate the random and the quotidian, its inclusiveness, its freedom to move backwards and forwards in time and to shift perspectives (she admires the way in which it 'double exposes' itself, thereby providing a useful metaphor for the duplicitous narrative voice of *The Bell Jar*). […] It knows itself to be treading on dangerous

---

42   Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 132.
43   Ibid., 106.

> ground in setting up a distinction, a rivalry even, be-
> tween poetry and prose. […] She sets herself the task of
> distinguishing between the two genres, but ends up con-
> ceding the fluidity of generic boundaries and the futility
> of attempting to impose any kind of meaningful hier-
> archy. In refusing to come down definitively on either
> side of contemporary debates about genre and cultural
> value, Plath keeps her options open.[44]

Esther perfectly epitomizes Plath's original dilemma. Indeed, *The Bell Jar* has been referred to as "a poet's note-book" or "a poet's novel, a casebook almost in stanzas," which points out the hybridity of this text, its generic instability. For instance, the lyricism of many passages could well be associated to a poetic piece. Such an artic-ulation of the text implies multiple narrative voices (al-ways Esther's), which express different attitudes towards the actions that take place in the novel. It is as if Esther's subjectivity exploded into a series of voices, speaking from different temporal planes. Throughout the novel we see Esther (both as a narrator and a character) at pains to hold the centre—to use an expression dear to Woolf and to Plath—to keep her subjectivity from disintegration.

I read in this perspective Esther's obsession with the double, especially when it is related to Shem and Shaun. Elsewhere I discussed the representation of the twins and the forms of antagonism and fight it stages in the *Wake* in terms of the lateralisation of the brain, whereby Shem and Shaun act like the two halves of the brain's cerebral cortex—left and right— and execute different, most of the times opposing, functions. An analogous usage of the dou-ble can be detected in *The Bell Jar*, whereby the transfor-mations in the subjectivity of Esther Greenwood produce a kaleidoscopic narrative in which dichotomic concepts

---

44   Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84-85.

overlap and blend one into the other. As a consequence, the unreliability of the narrator, the complex chronology of the book, and its wholly ambivalent ending, conspire against the temptation to see truth and certainty where there is only confusion and uncertainty.

The search for the self and for the affirmation of a subjectivity is first and foremost staged as an attempt to emancipate oneself from other literary examples, from those Plath is indebted to in terms of aesthetics. Such a need for emancipation is also suggested by the anaphoric "I am, I am, I am" or "Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich" she consistently employs in both her poems and prose works. Here again producing a Joycean echo, in fact it is impossible not to think of the Leopold Bloom of the end of "Nausicaa," who writes in the sand "I [...]. AM. A."[45] By contrast, such a desire, almost an urge, to be one and only one subjectivity is always already undermined by the opposing and equally strong desire to be more than just one subjectivity. To be able to "transfigure" oneself and become all-encompassing is also a trait that Plath shares with Stephen Dedalus ("the born-writer who can't write"),[46] this is what she writes in her journal on February 3rd, 1958:

> So far behind I am [...] I now go rapidly pace-pace-apace through the book I dreamily campus-wandered with myself, some five years ago, the Portrait of The Artist, word-encanting, descanting. how to present, vividly, the act of creation which takes place? I snort out onto white waiting fingers a greeny clot of snot,

---

45   James Joyce, *Ulysses*. The Gabler Edition (London: Random, 1986); *Ulysses*: *A Critical and Synoptic Edition*, edited by Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York: Garland, 1986), 13.1258-1264.

46   Kukil *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 476.

transparent eggwhite-set with a red veinburst of blood,
wipe it behind the bedpost head. No Stephen I.[47]

I find Plath's reflections on the *Portrait* particularly re-
vealing, because it is possible to actually witness the ongo-
ing creative process of her writing. On the one hand, Plath
tries to understand how Joyce can reproduce life in all its
forms through the word-encanting and descanting of his
prose. On the other, we see how she incorporates Joyce's
writing into her own, how she, or better her fictional self,
can turn into a Stephen, be alive as he seems alive on the
page, and concentrate on the detail of the "greeny clot of
snot," make it hers as it has always belonged to her person-
al experience, and then separate from him: "No Stephen
I." Even when the discourse on subjectivity seems to focus
on issues that go beyond the question of genre, the search
for a synthesis between prose and poetry is still present.
What strikes Plath is Stephen's *poetic* understanding of re-
ality, his need to transfigure its trivialities and make them
sublime.

I think that the closing scene of *The Bell Jar* is par-
ticularly effective in visually representing the questions
I've been considering in this chapter, which are at the ba-
sis of Plath's aesthetics. As I have argued, the necessity
to choose between poetry and prose is not merely related
to the kind of artistic expression that suits Plath's talent
better, it is first and foremost related to what can possibly
be the best way to recount reality, to eventually be able
to embrace life as it is. The latter being the *condicio sine
qua non* for any forms of artistic expression worth of the
name. Hence at the end of the novel, as Esther is about to
trespass the threshold from the psychiatric hospital she has
been sectioned to the room in which doctors will check her
mental stability, what is at stake is not "just" her health, it

---

47   Ibid., 321.

is the chance to be a poet, to transfigure reality in order to understand its very essence.

Plath leaves the reader with the feeling that if Esther trespasses that edge, what remains is a story to be told with the language of reality and rationality or, to quote Blake, the language of deceit. Esther will probably live, the artist she wants to be will live to write some story, but the poet will die.

> Pausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor who had told me about the rivers and the Pilgrims on my first day, and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks. The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room.[48]

In her journal entry of May 5th, 1958, Plath comments about Denis Johnston's production of *Finnegans Wake* she attended, and enthusiastically observes:

> the riverrun opening, the 'tell me of Anna Livia,' the stone & the elm scene at the river with the washerwomen, the Mookse & the Cripes [sic], the Ondt and the Gracehoper. Some scenes did make me shiver, the words carried all the creak, too-loud records & cricked neck before them—but the rest of it was trying to catch the mumblety-peg jabber of cosmic doubleacrostic in the heart of a thunderstorm.[49]

Plath's auditory description of the performance certainly reveals her interest in and genuine amazement for the language of the *Wake*, which engages her as a poet in the

---

48   Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 257.
49   Kukil, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 378.

first place. Perhaps Joyce is so crucial to Plath because
he has succeeded in finding the perfect balance between
reality and imagination, the trivial and the substantial,
and, above all, he has made it possible to speak poetically
through prose and to narrate realistically through poetry.

In III.3 of *Finnegans Wake* Joyce discusses the authen-
ticity of the Christian message and of the sacred scriptures
by casting doubt on their real origin: "The prouts who will
invent a writing there ultimately is the *poeta*, still more
learned, who discovered the raiding there originally. That's
the point of eschatology our book of kills reaches for now
in soandso many counterpoint words."[50]

By assigning to the poet (the poeta) the authorship of
the Christian message and of the Bible (the story of all sto-
ries) Joyce presents a hierarchy, whereby the poet comes
before the writer. The first word ever uttered or recorded
was a poet's, and any writer who aims at recounting the
very essence of life has to become such. Indeed, only the
poet can be associated to the very act of creation (the Bible
is not just the story of all stories, it is also the story of the
world as we experience and understand it), he/she bears
within his/her name such a mystical task—"poet" derives
in fact from the Greek *poiein*, to "create"—therefore it is
only the poet who knows how to use "the clear vowels"
and make them "rise like balloons."[51]

---

50   Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 482.32. Italics mine.
51   Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song," *Ariel* (London: Faber &
Faber, 1965), 3.

Corin Braga

INNER TEMPORALITIES IN THE ROMANIAN MODERNIST NOVEL

It was late, in the second half of the nineteenth century, that the Romanian countries began an accelerated process of modernisation and synchronisation with the West. Because of this delay, World Standard Time was adopted only after the unification of Greater Romania (1918), and GMT use was generalised, for most Romanian institutions, as late as 1929. Notwithstanding all this, Romanian intellectuals and writers experienced, often by way of cultural influence, the anxieties caused by the replacement of "God's time" (solar time, astronomical time) with "human time" (chronometric, artificial, conventional time). They could also feel the breakneck rush and implacable pace of the new industrial civilisation, which had fuelled what the philosophers of modernity saw as a process of disenfranchisement, dehumanisation, and identity loss. Following in the footsteps of Western writers like Marcel Proust, modernist Romanian writers began, after the Great War, to explore the dimensions of inner, individual time, in a gesture of revolt against classical, realist canons, homogeneous perspectives, and linear time.

In Romania, the main Western theoretical viewpoints that spurred the dislocation of standardising narrative perspectives based on public, objective time (*time on the clock*), by partial and polyphonic perspectives of private, subjective time (*time in the mind*, as Virginia Woolf calls it)[1] came from relativistic physics, Henri Bergson's intui-

---

1   Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Penguin, 1993), 68.

tionism and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. To start with, even though Albert Einstein's theory of special and general relativity appealed to a very few mathematicians and physicists, the *vulgate* of the new physical paradigm began to impregnate the vision of Romanian intellectuals. By contrast with Newton's conception of universal, homogeneous, linear, and irreversible time, in Einstein's view time depended on the state of each observer measuring it. To modernist Romanian novelists, the revolutionary idea of the relativity of reference systems and local times provided a theoretical incentive for the use of relativistic points of view and polyperspectivism.

Of the philosophers and psychologists who theorised inner duration, Henri Bergson and, to a smaller extent, William James had the greatest echo. As is known, James introduced the phrases "stream of thought" and "stream of consciousness" in his important treatise *Principles of Psychology* (1890).[2] The previous philosophical tradition, beginning with Descartes and Locke, had postulated that simple ideas correspond to simple objects in nature, and that our thinking is made up of atom-like, pointillistic facts of consciousness, corresponding to divisible matter in the outside world. In disagreement with this conception ("mind-stuff theory"),[3] James shows that the minimum mind unit is a complete and unitary state of consciousness, and that these states are chained together in uninterrupted mental flow. This "stream" or flow of inner time represents our subjective life, forming the psychological basis (as opposed to the religious and metaphysical) for the more abstract concept of soul.[4]

Henri Bergson developed this vision in a series of works such as *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*

---

2   William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. I (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 85, 180.

3   Ibid., vol. I, 145.

4   Ibid., vol. I, 182.

(1889), *Matière et mémoire* (1896), *Introduction à la métaphysique* (1903), and *L'évolution créatrice* (1907). Accepting the Cartesian divide between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* but criticising the Kantian *a priori* categories, Bergson made a radical distinction between space (characteristic of external things) and time (characteristic of consciousness).[5] Externally "stretched-out" things require a spatial, quantitative, atomistic form of knowledge that divides and isolates objects and qualities. By contrast, when attempting to know itself, consciousness finds that its states unfold in succession, that they are qualitative, integral, and indivisible. The flow of states of consciousness makes up "duration," the subjective manifestation of temporality.[6]

Knowledge of the outer, physical world is steered by reason and intellect and is the subject of science. Intuition would be the best tool for investigating the inner universe, which is the subject of "metaphysics"—Bergson thus reallocates classical, ontological metaphysics, to human psychology, which becomes an autonomous field of research, with its own categories and its specific universe.[7] When time is grasped by reason, it is uniformised, homogenised, atomised, transformed into a quantifiable dimension, which allows the establishment of a public time that is valid for all. As sensed by intuition, time is continuous, indivisible, deeply personal, relative, it is the private time of each individual. As Bryony Randall shows, common time (the everyday) is characterised by practicality, regularity, computability, and precision, whereas individualised time suspends pragmatic imperatives and is generated by the

---

5   Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will. An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, translated by F. L. Pogson (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 101-102.

6   Ibid., 104.

7   Ibid., 155.

"states of boredom, impatience and daydream."[8] We can generalise by saying that if reason and lucid consciousness (the Freudian reality principle) generate a uniform, public time, this can nonetheless be interrupted and dislocated through altered states of consciousness.

Finally, the third philosophy that marked interwar Romanian prose was phenomenology. Accepting the idea that "the realm of phenomena of consciousness is so truly the realm of a Heraclitean flux," Edmund Husserl laid the foundation for a phenomenology of consciousness.[9] Beyond the immediate experiences and data of consciousness, he aimed to reach the centralising, "nuclear" point of psychism, which William James called "self of selves" or "the thinker."[10] This active centre of consciousness, around which the stream of consciousness and memory coheres, is identified by Husserl as Kant's "transcendental ego."[11] Releasing this essential point required a twofold *époché*: first, a phenomenological reduction, which bracketed external reality in order to firmly isolate the life of the spirit from natural and social existence, followed by an eidetic reduction, in order to identify the transcendental ego amidst the noetic flux. Translated into literature, this philosophy involved a radical lessening of interest in the outer world of space, and laid emphasis on psychological duration, on the figures of the interior world.

Romanian literature caught up with this new paradigm before long. Bergson's concepts were frequently mentioned in the works of Romanian theorists and philosophers, such as Constantin Rădulescu-Motru's *Problemele psihologiei*

---

8   Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45.

9   Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 49.

10   James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, 301.

11   Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 63 sqq.

['Problems of Psychology,' 1907], Constantin Antoniade's *Filozofia lui Bergson* ['Bergson's Philosophy,' 1910], I. Botez's *Viața românească* ['Romanian Life,' 1912], Ion Albu's *Reflexii asupra intuiției lui Bergson* ['Reflections on Bergson's Intuition,' 1914],[12] Lucian Blaga's *Ceva despre filosofia lui H. Bergson* ['On H. Bergson's Philosophy,' 1915], I. Petrovici's *Filosofie și știință* ['Philosophy and science,' 1923], Garabet Ibrăileanu's *Influențe străine și realități naționale* ['Foreign Influences and National Realities,' 1925], and Tudor Vianu's *Generație și creație. Contribuții la critica timpului* ['Generation and Creation. Contributions to a Critique of Time,' 1936].

Although they noticed that a mutation was about to occur with the advent of the psychological novel, the critics of the era remained reluctant to embrace it: while acknowledging its merits, they nonetheless deemed other forms of fiction to be superior to it. For instance, in a study entitled *Creație și analiză* ['Creation and Analysis,' 1930], Garabet Ibrăileanu drew an important distinction between literature that presents the outer life of characters (*moralism*) and literature that analyses their inner experiences (*analysis*).[13] He also distinguished between two types of writers: "moralists," who create streamlined and simplified human typologies, and "analysts," like Dostoevsky or Proust, who practise inner observation. The theoretical backdrop of different introspection techniques is correctly identified in the thought of William James (psychological continuum), Henri Bergson (duration, intuition), Edmund Husserl (eidetic reduction) and in the dominant currents of the time: intuitionism, energetism, phenomenology, voluntarism, personalism, psychoanalysis, to some extent,

---

12   Ion Albu was the pseudonym under which Lucian Blaga published his Bergsonian monograph.

13   Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Creație și analiză. Note pe marginea unor cărți* ['Creation and Analysis. Notes on Some Books'], in *Opere* ['Works'], vol. 3 (București: Minerva, 1976), 202.

etc. According to Ibrăileanu, the revolution sparked by Marcel Proust hinged not so much on the French prose writer's ability to scour the unconscious, but on his ability to transform states of the mind into a story, to narrativise consciousness, as it were, or to create autonomous "mindscapes."[14] But Ibrăileanu rethought his original dichotomy, replacing the concept of *moralism* (social analysis, *comportism,* "behaviourism") with that of *creație* ("creation"). By creation, he meant the "amount of life transferred into the novel," or the writer's ability to create fictional worlds.[15] As the literary critic stated, "creation is superior to analysis."[16] This is how the functional distinction between descriptive moralism and psychological analysis was sophistically substituted with that between creation and analysis. In the first distinction, Tolstoy and Balzac were simply equal and equivalent to Dostoevsky or Proust. However, in switching to the second distinction, Ibrăileanu could justify his personal preference for the former authors, whom he genuinely held in higher esteem.

Eugen Lovinescu was another important Romanian interwar critic, who championed the theory of cultural synchronism. He took note of the mutations occurring in European fiction but, in his approach to Romanian literature, he distorted the meaning of stream of consciousness. In opposition to *semănătorism* and *poporanism*,[17] he claimed, modernist literature (especially that promoted by the magazine *Sburătorul*) had undergone a shift from the rural to the urban (in terms of dominant settings) and "from subject to object or from lyricism to true epic literature."[18] Because he did not have enough information to un-

---

14   Ibid., 205.
15   Ibid., 241.
16   Ibid., 221.
17   Literary trends privileging ruralist topics.
18   Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* ['The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature'],

derstand the specifics of psychological fiction compared to realist prose writing, Lovinescu collapsed the opposition between subjective literature, understood as inferior lyricism, and objective literature, representing "pure narrativity."[19] He scorned Felix Aderca for his "reverse evolution" from *Domnişoara din strada Neptun* ['The Young Lady in Neptune St.'] to *Omul descompus* ['The Decomposed Man'], that is, for his regression from the objective to the subjective under the influence of the "latest fad of Proustian psychology, whereby facts need not be shown in chronological sequence, but in alignment with the moods they awaken."[20] From the same angle, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was praised for her evolution from the poetic lyricism of the first volumes of stories to the glacial realism of the Hallipa cycle, and Liviu Rebreanu's "objective narrative" in *Ion* was preferred to his psychological analysis in *Forest of the Hanged* and *Ciuleandra,* which "have the air of artificially concocted, yet elegantly deployed psychological experiments."[21]

Marcel Proust and, to a far lesser extent, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, were the European authors of stream-of-consciousness novels with the greatest impact on Romanian literature, which was largely Francophone at the time. Various studies and essays began to be written on Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* in the 1920s: Coca Irineu's *Marcel Proust şi romanul inconştientului* ['Marcel Proust and the novel of the unconscious,' 1922], Mihai Ralea's *Marcel Proust* (1923), Constantin Stere's *În căutarea timpului pierdut. Din carnetul unui solitar* III ['In Search of Lost Time. From the Notebook of a Solitary Man,' 1925], Cezar Petrescu's *Marcel Proust şi John Ruskin* ['Marcel Proust and John Ruskin,' 1927], Paul Zarifopol's *Gusturi*

vol. 2 (București: Minerva, 1973), 9.
19   Ibid., 238-239.
20   Ibid., 222-223.
21   Ibid., 268.

și judecăți. O notă despre Proust ['Tastes and Judgments. A Note on Proust,' 1929], Dan Botta's *Compoziția operei lui Marcel Proust* ['The Structure of Marcel Proust's Work,' 1929], Henriette Yvonne Stahl's *O paralelă între Proust și Huxley* ['A Parallel between Proust and Huxley,' 1933], Mihail Sebastian's *Corespondența lui Marcel Proust* ['Marcel Proust's Correspondence,' 1939] and Tudor Vianu's *Problemele memorialisticei* ['The Matter of Memoirs,' 1941]. In *Arta prozatorilor români* ['The Art of Romanian Prose Writers,' 1941], Vianu actually showed that Romanian "new novelists," such as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Liviu Rebreanu, and Camil Petrescu, had been undeniably influenced by Marcel Proust. But it is also true that, without denying the importance of the French novelist, authors like Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and Anton Holban would not accept his tutelage, on the grounds that they had written their first books before reading his oeuvre. Holban argued that "I was writing *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic* ['A Death That Proves Nothing'] when I wasn't even aware of Proust. Mere correspondences."[22] Still, we can suspect that he made this statement precisely to defend his individuality, out of fear of being "swallowed" by the aura of the French novelist and writing a novel that "risked being just a pale copy of a masterly original."[23]

The poetic art of the "new structure" proposed by the psychological novel was outlined by Camil Petrescu in the essay "Noua structură și opera lui Marcel Proust" ['The New Structure and Marcel Proust's Works,' 1935]. With a background in philosophy, Petrescu also endorsed (like Lovinescu) the thesis that Romanian literature was synchronising with the spirit of the times. If traditional

---

22   Anton Holban, *Pseudojurnal. Corespondențe, acte, confesiuni* ['Pseudojournal. Correspondence, Documents, Confessions'] (București: Minerva, 1978), 205.

23   Ibid., 205.

literature was shaped by the ideals of classical rational-
ism, the new literature was integrated into the contempo-
rary trends of the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*),
irrationalism, vitalism, intuitionism, organicism and psy-
choanalysis. But unlike Lovinescu's theses, which recom-
mended an evolution from the subjective to the objective,
for Camil Petrescu the great mutation consisted in the fact
that "the new structure in psychology is unquestionably
governed by subjectivity, not objectivity."[24] Bergsonian
duration, Husserlian phenomenological reality, the stream
of consciousness, and inner time became the prevalent
field of (self)investigation for writers influenced by Proust.

This turn from outer to inner reality entailed a shift
in authorial perspective. Creating the semblance of ob-
jectively existing space and time, realist literature relied
on an omniscient narrator, capable of representing any
physical or psychological event in the world. Modernist
literature, on the other hand, Camil Petrescu wrote, was
limited to the consciousness of the experiencing (and nar-
rating) self: "the artist can only reveal his own vision of
the world. This is what Proust does, with determination
and lucidity."[25] Hence his famous profession of literary
technique: "To describe only what I see, what I hear, what
my senses record, what *I* think ... That's the only reality I
can convey... But this is the reality of my consciousness,
my psychological content... I cannot get out of myself...
Whatever I do I can only describe my own sensations, my
own images. The only way I can speak honestly is in the
first person."[26]

With the introduction of "perspectivism" (subjective
viewpoint), the canons of classical art (unity of action,
time and space, typologies of characters, reduced to single

---

24   Camil Petrescu, *Teze și antiteze* ['Theses and
Antitheses'] (București: Minerva, 1971), 18.
25   Ibid., 28.
26   Ibid., 27.

dominant traits) were displaced by much freer, more open, and sometimes uncontrollable structures designed to capture the flow of consciousness, the stream of thoughts, doubts, aspirations, affirmations, negations, or memories. Instead of the flat and static "characters" of traditional literature, the Hallipa cycle of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novels features multifaceted, fungible characters, commingling a "multiplicity of selves" which can only be rendered by way of inner duration and unpredictable psychological evolutions. The most direct method of capturing this "total present" of the soul consists in free associations, unnecessary digressions, and "anarchetypal" developments.[27] From the point of view of the mind states surveyed, Camil Petrescu makes a distinction that explains the Romanian writers' preference for French over Anglo-American literature: although both Joyce and Proust use stream of consciousness, in the former's work, inner life "is far too poor and without merit to justify such a European reputation...," while the latter leans on a nobler and more significant spiritual material, namely involuntary memory.[28]

Nourished by such theoretical and literary influences, but also by the "spirit of the time," psychological prose quickly took root in interwar Romanian literature. A first attempt had been made, as Al. Protopopescu shows, by Duiliu Zamfirescu in the novel *Lydda* (1904), inspired by Paul Bourget.[29] Gheorghe Lăzărescu lists among the precursors of modernist literature authors with romantic or naturalistic poetics, such as Pantazi Ghica, Mihai Eminescu, Barbu Delavrancea, Al. Vlahuță, Ioan Slavici

---

27   Corin Braga, *De la arhetip la anarhetip* ['From Archetypes to Anarchetypes'] (Iași: Polirom, 2006), 243-272.

28   Petrescu, *Teze și antiteze*, 33-34.

29   Al. Protopopescu, *Romanul psihologic românesc* [The Romanian Psychological Novel'] (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2000), 10-12.

and I. L. Caragiale.[30] After the Great War the following authors quickly rallied themselves to the new aesthetics: Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Liviu Rebreanu, Cezar Petrescu, Felix Aderca, Camil Petrescu, Anton Holban, Gib Mihăescu, C. Fântâneru, Garabet Ibrăileanu, Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian, Ury Benador, Ion Biberi, Octav Șuluțiu, Dan Petrașincu, Max Blecher, Lucia Demetrius, Cella Serghi, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, Ioana Postelnicu, and Ticu Archip.

The field explored by this new genre of fiction is that of inner reality (*tranche de vie intérieure*), inner consciousness, inner time. This entails the "bracketing" (in a phenomenological sense) of external reality, of objective, steady-flowing temporality, and the relinquishment of the convention of mimetic literature. Beings and objects of the external world are of interest only insofar as they are reflected in the consciousness of the character (or characters), only as flittering decorations on the mind's screen. The great semantic pool of realist literature, reflecting either the rural environment (lyrical *sămănătorism*) or the urban one (the objective modernism theorised by Lovinescu), is rivalled by a new imaginary universe, in which the outside world has acquired a ghostly semblance, creating space for the figures of interiority. In his treatise on *The Psychology of Literature*, Norbert Groeben emphasises the importance of psychoanalysis in populating this autoscopic imaginary with figures and images: "as a method 'discovered' by Dujardin in 1888, the technique of the inner monologue remained a hollow scheme until psychoanalysis gave it substance."[31] As Robert Humphrey shows, the psychological novel is not limited to the

---

30   Gheorghe Lăzărescu, *Romanul de analiză psihologică în literatura română interbelică* ['The Psychological Novel in Romanian Interwar Fiction'] (București: Minerva, 1983).

31   Norbert Groeben, *Psihologia literaturii. Știința literaturii între hermeneutică și empirizare* ['The Psychology of Literature. The Science of Literature between Hermeneutics

rational or diurnal consciousness of characters (as with Henry James) or to memory and reminiscence (as with Marcel Proust), but explores all types of psychological content, both verbalised and preverbal, and all levels of the psychic apparatus: sensations and memories, feelings and conceptions, fantasies and imaginations, intuitions, visions and insights.[32] As stated above, "altered states of consciousness" are the most propitious conduits for "alienating" the individual from history, from public time.

In interwar Romanian literature, the writer who epitomised this aesthetic and explored the strangest psychological states was Max Blecher (8 September 1909—31 May 1938). Suffering from spinal tuberculosis, bed-stricken in several sanatoriums in France and Romania, he perhaps best assimilated and capitalised on Proust's influence. In his two psychological novels,[33] *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată* ['Occurrence in the Immediate Unreality,' 1936] and *Vizuina luminată* ['The Illuminated Burrow,' posthumously published, 1971], Blecher plunges into the alternative world of the mind, in the "immediate unreality" his title hints at. Like Marcel, sonically isolated in his writing studio, the Romanian narrator also writes cloistered in his ward. But the sanatorium becomes a "lighted burrow," occasioning a retreat from the outside world. It is a submerged space that fosters introversion, recollection, and illumination. The beginning of the first novel amounts to a poetics of introversion: "when I gaze for a long time at a fixed point on the wall, what sometimes happens is that

and Empiricism'], translated by Gabriel Liiceanu and Suzana Mihalescu (București: Univers, 1978), 127.

32   Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 7.

33   His third novel, *Inimi cicatrizate* ['*Scarred Hearts*,' 1937], resorts to a deliberate, compensatory technique of realistic and behaviourist narration.

I will no longer know who I am or where I am. I sense my lack of my identity from afar, as though I had, for an instant, become a complete stranger. With matching strength, this abstract personage and my real person vie to convince me."[34] The state of reverie before falling asleep in Marcel Proust's novel and the hypnagogic gaze of a point on the wall in Max Blecher's text trigger in the characters what the Romanian prose writer calls—with hindsight, remembering his childhood—"crises" of unreality.[35]

In a very concrete way, the narrator removes himself from the world and personally experiences the process, characteristic for art, that Russian formalists called "estrangement." He becomes aware of the fact that he is not part of the outside world, that he is isolated in what, in the jargon of neuroscience, is known as the "ego tunnel." He watches external events as on a screen unfurled around him: "when I shut my eyes—as I sit in the garden bathed in afternoon sunlight, or when I'm alone, or as my fingers lightly brush my cheek while in conversation—I always discover the same tremulous darkness, the same intimate and familiar cavern, the same burrow, warm and illuminated, flickering with shadows, inside my body, the substance of my 'self' lying on the 'other' side of the skin."[36] In solitude and isolation, the narrator brings about a suspension of perceptual stimuli that link consciousness with reality, a kind of "sensory deprivation" (practised in mystical techniques such as ancient incubation), which allows the bracketing or *époché* (in psychological, not philosophical terms) of the phenomenal world. Self-duplication

---

34   Max Blecher, *Occurrence in the Immediate Unreality*, translated by Alistair Ian Blyth (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2009), 26.
35   Ibid., 23.
36   Max Blecher, *The Illuminated Burrow: A Sanatorium Journal*, translated by Gabi Reigh (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2022), e-book.

introduces an alienating distance from the real universe
which, seen from the outside, with the enchanted eyes of
the one who explores a new world, acquires "a freshness
it did not previously possess."[37] Objects are engulfed in a
"veritable frenzy of freedom," become independent of one
another, experience "ecstatic exaltation," get rid of the ba-
nal appearance they have in everyday life and seem "flayed
down to the flesh: raw, unspeakably raw."[38] Floating "apart
from any world," the narrator feels "more profoundly
and more painfully that I had nothing to do in this world,
nothing to do except roam through parks—through dusty
glades baking in the sun, deserted and wild."[39]

Through alienation from reality, the stream-of-con-
sciousness novel causes a "literary reduction" (by analogy
with the method of phenomenological reduction) of the
objective world and brings to the surface the "storeroom
of an unknown reality."[40] Blecher proposes the broadest
panoply of "altered states of consciousness" that feed the
semantic pool of the psychological universe: fatigue and
affectual alienation,[41] the flux of memory and reverie,[42]
isolation and sensory deprivation; dreams, with all their

---

37   Blecher, *Occurrence*, 26.
38   Ibid., 30-31.
39   Ibid., 28.
40   Blecher, *The Illuminated Burrow*, e-book.
41   "Everything became faraway and desolate. It was
morning; the men were unloading the meat; the wind was pierc-
ing through my coat; I was shivering from the cold and from
sleeplessness; in what kind of world did I live?" in Blecher,
Occurrence, 75.
42   "When I close my eyes I can call up a particular mem-
ory from amongst all the others and feel it come to life with the
intensity of its bygone reality […] when memories, visions and
places dance underneath my eyelids, touched by it all, what is the
meaning of this endless inner light," in Blecher, *The Illuminated
Burrow*, e-book.

aberrant forms, lucid dreams, dreams within dreams, etc.,[43] eroticism (the first forms of "sexual acquaintance" with Clara), hallucinations caused by medicine and drugs,[44] and lethal delirium.[45] These experiences end up collapsing the ontology of the outside world (and the conventions of realist prose): "Such episodes deeply shook my faith in a stable, coherent reality (a reality I could always embellish with perfectly plausible and convincing modifications whenever I wanted) as well as revealing the essential dreamlike quality of all our everyday actions."[46]

The other Romanian writers who began to explore inner duration between the two world wars were not as radical in deconstructing reality and, instead of tipping over into an alternative world, they often pursued the merging of the real and the imagined. The altered states of consciousness that most often caused a retreat within the self were the anguish of death (war), love and its reverse, jealousy, madness (or genetic degeneration, disease) and mystical (or fantastic) experiences. To illustrate the way modernist authors pitted an individual perspective and a private, monadic time against astronomical, or public time, I will

───────────────

43   "In the dream I see and feel the position in which I find myself. I know in which bed and in which room it is that I am sleeping. My dream moulds itself like a fine skin over my actual posture and over my sleep in that moment. In this regard, it might be said that I am awake: I am awake, but I am sleeping and dreaming of my being awake. I am also dreaming my sleep in that moment," in Blecher, *Occurrence*, 110.

44   "The only thing I remember was that nothing hurt and I was floating in an indescribable drowsiness that hollowed out my chest and made it impossible to grip onto any kind of solid, stable reality," Blecher, *The Illuminated Burrow*, e-book.

45   "It was a handsome head, extraordinarily handsome. Around three times larger than a human head, slowly rotating on a bronze axis that transfixed it from crown to throat," in Blecher, *Occurrence*, 94.

46   Blecher, *The Illuminated Burrow*, e-book.

analyse the way in which the theme of war is addressed in Romanian modernist fiction, highlighting the contrast between, on the one hand, the classical-realist vision, in which the violence of warfare is explored from a geostationary level and seen through an impersonal omniscient narrator "Godlike gaze" and, on the other hand, the modernist-relativist vision, in which reality is delimited by the subjective perspective of an individual reduced to his own interiority. More specifically, I will dwell on three novels: *Forest of the Hanged* by Liviu Rebreanu (1922), *The Dragon* by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu (1923) and *Last Night of Love, First Night of War* by Camil Petrescu (1930).

A civilisational cataclysm of the scale of the Great War was bound to leave traces in the consciousness of Romanian writers. Compared to a realist-objective perspective, the psychological novel could render more directly, from the inside, certain anxieties and obsessions triggered by the proximity of individual and collective death. Forced to get immersed in battle, Ștefan Gheorghidiu, Camil Petrescu's protagonist, makes the following Bergsonian philosophical observation, which supports a poetics of presence: "there is only one world, that of representations. We can only have our time and place in our senses and, therefore, in our minds. The rest we replace with fake, conventional images."[47] It is true that, in the most important novels in this category, the realist narrative remains dominant, to a good extent, suggesting that atrocious reality imposes itself as an overwhelming presence that cannot be circumvented. However, besides the immediacy of external reality, an equally rich and pressing inner life is foregrounded through techniques such as psychological narrative or

---

47   Camil Petrescu, *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* ['Last Night of Love, First Night of War'], in *Opere*, vol. II, Ed. Al. Rosetti and Liviu Călin (București: Minerva, 1979), 320.

omniscient authorial commentary on the thoughts of the character (for example, the reflections of Apostol Bologa, in Liviu Rebreanu's novel, during his short leave in his native village), direct inner monologue (Gheorghidiu's jealousy driven anxieties during his "escape" from the training camp in Câmpulung), free indirect discourse (Apostol Bologa's pangs of conscience at the time of his desertion or execution), and the soliloquy in the confessional pages of a diary (the last pages of Papadat-Bengescu's *The Dragon*).

Starting from the phenomenological principle formulated by Camil Petrescu ("I cannot get out of myself"),[48] the analytical formula allows the war to be recounted from a subjective perspective, in contrast to the objective viewpoint of "big history." The First World War described by historians is completely different from the "grass-roots" perspective of narrators limited to the angle of individual witnesses. Apostol Bologa and Ștefan Gheorghidiu never have access to the general strategic plans and the overall conduct of the battles. They are always reduced to what they experience on the front and to the orders they receive from their superiors. This contrast between a panoramic and a narrow perspective is best displayed in *The Dragon*, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novel. Laura, the protagonist, sees the war from the perspective of a volunteer nurse in a small provincial town where the wounded brought from the front are treated. The writer uses most of the techniques associated with the stream of consciousness to reveal the different flow of subjective time, much slower than that of history, her partial and distorted perceptions of events,[49] the strange but expressive reactions caused by the death of soldiers and civilians, the emotional trauma

---

48   Petrescu, *Teze și antiteze*, 27.
49   For example, the way the protagonist, in the beginning of the novel, perceives the "bugle" making the public announcement of Romania's entry into the war.

caused by the disappearance of a relative, the feeling of depression and general malaise aroused by the armed conflict and, in the end, the sense of fragile existential rebirth. The conclusion is symptomatic: "They lived just in a corner of the world and could not have that look of things that embrace broad perspectives."[50]

In the psychological novel, war is an objective correlative for the characters' inner conflicts, inflaming or, on the contrary, dampening their tensions and torments. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu does not reveal the reasons for Laura, her protagonist's depression, which seems to be more complicated than mere Bovaric frustration: "To these conflicts war brought a solution. A huge one, commensurate with her revolt. It seemed that her turmoil, which sought and found no respite, had deliberately brewed a colossal storm to blunt her pain, and in its vortex every other power would dissolve."[51] These reasons are nonetheless revealed in the case of Ștefan Gheorghidiu, who, in the first half of the novel ("the last night of love"), recalls in Proustian fashion his marriage to Ela and the insidious jealousy that led to their separation. For Apostol Bologa, inner torment is endless, as erotic dissatisfaction (suspicion about Marta, love for Ilona) is exacerbated by much larger, social (duty to the Empire vs. ethnic affiliation) and metaphysical dilemmas (faith *v.* atheism, or civilisation *v.* nature).

In all these novels "real life," with all its horrors,[52] overwhelms personal deliberations and frustrations. The implacable effect of a monstrous and violent reality is a

---

50   Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, *Balaurul* ['The Dragon'], in *Opere* II (București: Minerva, 1975), 143.

51   Ibid., 16.

52   The title of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novel *Balaurul* ['The Dragon'] is a metaphor for the trains carrying wounded soldiers, carriages in whose bowels the victims of the fighting are digested, but also a trope of the war, seen as a blood-thirsty Leviathan.

terminus point for ruminations and indecision: it puts an end to Apostol Bologa's pangs of conscience or serves as a remedy for Laura's and Ștefan Gheorghidiu's inner rifts. The unmediated and immediate presence of death[53] provides a counterbalance to the surfeit of inner life and puts into perspective subjective conflicts that have become irrelevant in the face of extinction: "The day before yesterday in Câmpulung I was prey to a madness that seemed irresolvable. So great is the distance from what happened yesterday, that these are much closer to my childhood than to me today [...] And then I suffered from things that appear meaningless today. Tonight, or tomorrow, I will die."[54]

But the heroes of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and Camil Petrescu are among the few who can use the borderline experience of war and death to sideline their inner agony. The other protagonists of interwar fiction no longer benefit from the cathartic shock applied by reality to introverted personalities; on the contrary, they tend to de-realise the actual world and to plunge ever more deeply into the meanders of a psyche that devours itself. For Sandu, the protagonist of the novel *A Death That Proves Nothing* by Anton Holban, Irina's senseless suicide cannot jolt him out of the trap of a self-torturing mind. The monoperspectivism theorised by Camil Petrescu has the perverse effect of nullifying certainties guaranteed by an omniscient narrator, removing from the scene a point of balance and objective judgment, and leaving the character unable to sieve through suspicions and conflicting interpretations. If the war frees Ștefan Gheorghidiu from "the whole past," that is, from his excruciating love experience, George Ladima and Fred Vasilescu, characters in another novel by Camil Petrescu, *The Bed of Procrustes*, remain prisoners of their own experiences and fantasies. As psychoanalysis shows,

---

53   "I know so well that I will die this night," Ștefan Gheorghidiu tells himself. Petrescu, *Ultima noapte*, 208.

54   Petrescu, *Ultima noapte*, 221.

moral conflicts that cannot be resolved end up transforming the desire for life (*libido*) into the throes of death (*mortido*). While Laura and Gheorghidiu are "revived," the characters in *The Bed of Procrustes* find no other way to eschew the torments of love than through death, just like Apostol Bologa regards his desertion as a veiled form of suicide and "salvation" from a painful existence. With the psychological turn in interwar Romanian literature, prose writers became less invested in exploring external reality and more interested in capturing inner duration, resorting to stream-of-consciousness techniques and relinquishing the conventions of realistic mimesis.

Part IV

War and Revolution as Disrupted Time

Angelika Reichmann

A "PANORAMA OF FUTILITY AND ANARCHY" REIMAGINED IN DAVID JONES'S *IN PARENTHESIS*[1]

Considerations of the medieval literary heritage and the idea of "making the past present" are central to the discussion of David Jones's art in general, and his 1937 book-length epic poem on the Great War, *In Parenthesis*, in particular. Due to obvious similarities between T. S. Eliot's "mythic method" and Jones's concepts of art, Jones's use of the Arthurian literary heritage in the representation of contemporary history, an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy,"[2] is a recurrent topic of analysis. Equally, his reliance on visual representations of Arthurian themes and his concomitant evocation of medieval architectural images are oft-mentioned motifs in discussions of his visual art. In my view, the two facets of Jones's art can most fruitfully be interpreted together.[3] Indeed, both the literary

---

2   T.S. Eliot, "Book Reviews: *Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," *The Dial,* November 1923, 483, British Library, T. S. Eliot: © Estate of T. S. Eliot, accessed 30 January 2019, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/review-of-ulysses-by-t-s-eliot-from-the-dial.

3   Thomas Dilworth also adopts a similar approach when he reads Jones's major poetry, including *In Parenthesis*, against the backdrop of his *Deluge* engravings. His reference point in doing so is Jones's own concept of his visual art and poetry as "an ark to preserve traditional symbols and values." Thomas Dilworth, *Reading David Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 5.

and visual aspects of Arthurian medievalism contribute to Jones's poetic reimagining of the historical nightmare he personally went through, as is evidenced by the imagery of the closing scene of *In Parenthesis*. The vast palette of literary (mythic) and visual allusions in that representation of a battlefield—a strange union of the dying soldiers and their natural environment—is apparently yet another attempt to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the surrounding chaos. Upon closer scrutiny, however, Jones's textual allusions appear to be diffuse, and the scene's cohesion is predominantly rooted in its medieval visual imagery, which seems to foreground a Christian interpretation of the soldier's sacrifice. Jones creates the impression of sacred space and time—or rather timelessness—through that, which can be interpreted as taking the "mythic method" to a new level, that of creating a coherent interpretation through visual rather than purely textual devices. Taking my cue from Paul K. Saint-Amour,[4] let me argue that the timelessness evoked here has at least two additional implications. First, it fulfils the encyclopaedic urge of preserving the archive in the face of total destruction by creating a time capsule of eternity[5] for the manifold literary and historical texts thus recalled within the context of timelessness. Conversely, it also makes—in accordance with the traumatic vision of time in the interwar period

---

4   Saint-Amour associates a traumatic concept of time with the interwar period, an anxious feeling of living in an interim between two worldwide disasters, which—he argues—is a definitive feature behind modernism and the encyclopaedic fiction it produced. Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–7. He mentions *In Parenthesis* as an example of modernist encyclopaedism, though it is beyond the scope of his discussion of modernist fiction. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, 38.

5   Cf. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, 295.

as "a new medium for delivering injury"[6]—the traumatic memory of the past, the war, ever-present. Ultimately, the totality of war overshadowing the interwar period[7] takes the form of leaving no space and time beyond those of an apparently senseless war in Jones's epic poem.

A brief look at Jones's personal and artistic career pinpoints Jones's working through of war trauma and *In Parenthesis* as a case study of the traumatic interwar time experience highlighted by Saint-Amour. As for his personal life, two of its relevant aspects consist of his experience of WWI and his conversion to Catholicism. Born in 1895, nineteen-year-old Jones volunteered right at the outbreak of the war to become a soldier and to serve almost four years with the Royal Welch Fusiliers among the London Welsh. While on front duty, he fought in the Battle of the Somme (July-November 1916), which ended with a rather tragic victory of the Allied Forces: approximately 620,000 British and French lives were lost in the horrible bloodshed of the months-long trench war.[8] As Thomas Dilworth recalls, though Jones was never treated for shell shock, his closest friends believed upon his return that he suffered from it[9] and his two nervous breakdowns—the first in 1932, following the completion of his epic poem's first draft[10]— and "lingering" depression in the subsequent four decades all point in that direction.[11] It may come as no surprise that shortly after the traumatic and definitive experience of the

---

6   Ibid., 7.
7   Ibid., 8.
8   For details of Jones's war experience see Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones in the Great War* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2012), especially the chapter on the Somme (102–119).
9   Ibid*.,* 15.
10   Ibid*.,* 216.
11   Ibid*.,* 15, 186.

war, in 1921 Jones converted to Catholicism,[12] to remain a
devout believer throughout his life. While his turn to faith
might be one kind of attempt to make sense of chaotic
modern existence, art—both visual and literary—obvious-
ly offered another solution for the same problem. Having
attended the Camberwell Art School in the 1910s, Jones
enrolled for formal training in the Westminster School
of Art right after the war to become a Post-Impressionist
painter-engraver,[13] also known for his book illustrations.[14]
While his fascination with medieval themes—especially
the Arthurian lore in Pre-Raphaelite art—thus predates
the Great War, the *topos* of "the soldier as an archetype
of duty, endurance and sacrifice"[15] was obviously inspired
by that event. Apparently, working through the traumatic
experience of the Great War in the verbal medium took
much longer for Jones than establishing his pictorial idi-
om: though he started to write poetry a decade earlier, *In
Parenthesis* came out almost twenty years after the war,
which puts it into sharp contrast with the immediacy of
most War Poetry. A radically innovative text of seven parts
and almost two hundred pages (including thirty-five pages
of authorial notes), *In Parenthesis* undermines traditional
categories of prose and poetry, or of various genres within
them: Vincent B. Sherry convincingly argues that it is a
dramatic monologue written in a mixture of free and prose
verse.[16] The text retells the Battle of the Somme to culmi-

---

12   Muriel Whitaker, "The Arthurian Art of David Jones,"
Arthuriana 7, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 137, *JSTOR*, accessed 30
January 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869280.
13   See, for instance, David Jones, *The Enclosed Garden,*
1924, Tate Gallery, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.tate.
org.uk/art/artists/david-jones-1370.
14   Whitaker, "Arthurian Art," 137–138.
15   Ibid., 137.
16   Vincent B. Sherry, "A New Boast for *In Parenthesis*:
The Dramatic Monologue of David Jones," *Notre Dame English*

nate in the Battle of Mametz Wood and to provide readers with a vision of the Great War which seemingly lacks even a modicum of optimism: regardless of historical facts, no mention of the final victory is made. Painful as the long interwar years of working his trauma through must have been for Jones, by the end he could still see the war as nothing but futile.

Jones's depiction of that futility also compares to Eliot's: just like *The Waste Land* (1922), *In Parenthesis* is replete with allusions to various historical and mythic narratives, including the Arthurian cycle. While the medievalism of Jones's visual art[17] goes without saying, his Eliotian approach to the past and tradition is key to understanding why and how medieval motifs can also feature in the contemporary setting of *In Parenthesis*. Parallels between the two modernists' personal convictions (see Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism in 1927) and artistic views[18] seem to be a matter of critical consensus. Yet, as

---

Journal 14, no. 2 (Spring 1982), passim, *JSTOR*, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40062446.

17   See David Jones, *Trystan ac Essyllt*, 1962, Estate of David Jones, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.flashpoint-mag.com/trystanfinal.htm.

18   See, for instance, David Blamires, *David Jones: Artist and Writer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 33; Paul Robichaud, *David Jones, Modernism and the Middle Ages,* PhD Diss. (University of Toronto, 2001, accessed 30 January 2019, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/15620/1/NQ63655.pdf), 31–39; Elizabeth Ward, *David Jones, Mythmaker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 84. Actually, the intersection of these two fields is obvious: as David Soud points out, "Jones […] and Eliot stand out as bringing strong theological stances to bear on the same poetic project: how to map within a poem the relation between history and eternity." David Soud, *Divine Cartographies: God, History, and Poesis in W. B. Yeats, David Jones and T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

Thomas Dilworth emphasises, the acquaintance of Eliot and Jones deepened into friendship only upon the completion of Jones's grand poem in about 1936.[19] The similarity of Jones's conservative views to Eliot's (even prior to the writing of *In Parenthesis*) is indicated by rather than rooted in the fact that in the 1930s both were members of the so-called Chelsea Group—a right-wing intellectual circle rejecting modern technocratic civilisation.[20] When it comes to the discussion of Eliot's and Jones's modernist approaches to the role of tradition—be it literary heritage, myth or history—perhaps nothing is more telling than Paul Robichaud's take at Jones's art. That is, the very title of his monograph, *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages and Modernism*[21] echoes often-quoted passages in Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which call for making sense of the present through the evocation of a past which is not dead but lived as present.[22]

---

19   Thomas Dilworth, "T.S. Eliot and David Jones," *The Sewanee Review* 102, no. 1 (Winter 1994), passim, *JSTOR*, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27546812.

20   Paul Robichaud, *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages and Modernism* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 26–27.

21   Robichaud, *David Jones*. See especially the chapter on Jones's medievalism, 139-168.

22   See "But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" and "And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living." T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), Bartleby.com, 1996, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html.

Francesca Brooks adopts the same view as a starting point for her discussion of Jones's "medieval modern" poetry: taking her clue from Alexander Nagel, she explains that "[i]n his poetry and art Jones treated the language, literature, and cultural artefacts of the Middle Ages as a form of live material," which could enhance the understanding of the present and provide "visual and verbal sign[s]" of a modern identity.[23] Indeed, Eliot must have recognised a kindred spirit in Jones, whose *In Parenthesis* he deemed to be "a work of genius."[24]

Based on the similarities between Eliot's and Jones's views on the inseparability of history, art and myth, at first glance *In Parenthesis* might appear to be a textbook case of Eliot's "mythic method," which famously means applying myth as "a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[25] Indeed, the very demanding, fragmentary and impressionistic text of *In Parenthesis* is a perfect linguistic reflection of chaotic wartime existence: its loosely connected sections feature for instance military slang and jargon, English and Welsh popular songs, and Cockney slang, to mention only a few

---

23   Francesca Brooks, *Poet of the Medieval Modern: Reading the Early Medieval Library with David Jones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6-7.

24   T. S. Eliot, "A Note of Introduction," in *In Parenthesis* (1937) by David Jones (London-Boston: Faber and Faber, 1963), vii.

25   T.S. Eliot, "Book Reviews: *Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," 483. James Joyce, to whom Eliot's words originally pertain, was also a significant model as a modernist for Jones, as Robichaud highlights: just like the Irish writer, the Welsh Jones also favoured including the Celtic tradition in the otherwise cosmopolitan Anglo-American modernism, which, in contrast, favoured the heritage of the European continent. *Making the Past Present,* 3-4.

of its registers and cultural contexts. Robichaud's rigorous intertextual analysis highlights the structural function of three main mythic narratives of the Celtic heritage in this textual complex. The first of these is the 6th-century Welsh elegiac poem *Y Gododdin* (Aneurin 1852),[26] to which the medieval Celtic tales preserved in the *Mabinogion*[27] and Malory's 15th-century compendium of Arthurian lore[28] are added.[29] Indeed, Jones's own notes also reveal this much, although they teasingly refrain from interpreting his allusions and are restricted to identifying their sources. In that, Jones also seems to tread in Eliot's footsteps, although he adds a new twist to the American poet's practice by highlighting the vanity of his own notes, for instance through emphasising that his memories or the texts he quotes are imprecise. Both the profusion of his allusions and these subversive notes suggest that his use of (mythical) intertexts and other medieval references is somewhat subtler and more intriguing than Eliot's "controlling, or ordering, […] giving a shape and a significance" should imply.[30]

---

26   Aneurin, *Y Gododdin*, translated by John Williams (London: William Rees, 1852), *Project Gutenberg,* 2009, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9842/9842-h/9842-h.htm.

27   *The Mabinogion* (1849), translated by Charlotte E. Guest (New York: Dover, 1997). This was the first English edition of the Celtic tales.

28   Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (1485) (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996).

29   See Robichaud, *David Jones*, 87-108; 128-132; 109-127, respectively.

30   Actually, as Michael Bell has convincingly demonstrated, these often-quoted concepts of Eliot's *Ulysses* review much rather characterise Eliot's own religious attitude to myth than Joyce's—or modernists' in general. For this reason, Bell regards the above-quoted lines of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (n. 18) as key to understanding a much more playful and genuinely modernist approach to myth—and time, one could add.

In my view, Muriel Whitaker's insightful discussion of medievalism in David Jones's visual art, by analogy, can also shed light on those subtleties and intricacies. I find her analysis of Jones's 1938-40 *Guenever*[31] particularly relevant here because of that work's topical similarity and temporal closeness to *In Parenthesis.* This drawing of mixed technique (pencil, pen, and watercolour) depicts a scene from Malory: Guenever and her knights are captured by Meleagant, but Lancelot uses the occasion to make love to the Queen. Despite the medieval topic, Whitaker calls attention to the fact that the diffuse visual images of the drawing allude to various historical ages and mythological contexts. While the ribbed ceiling evokes a gothic castle, the arches and columns form a chapel-like space with an altar, which conveys the fundamentally Christian symbolism of the sacrament—a mystical narrative in which Guenever and Lancelot play the roles of Christ's Bride and Christ, respectively (see *Song of Songs*). In contrast, the wounded knights of the Arthurian scene are partly replaced by injured soldiers—eternal victims of war—from various historical ages. This actualises the image and allows Whitaker to associate the "now-ness" of the picture even with "the blitzed Londoners taking refuge in the castle-bomb shelter." For Whitaker the drawing, nevertheless, is characterized by unity and formal cohesion, which she ascribes to the different arcs in the composition: those of the ribbed ceiling, the chapel, the lovers' bodies, even the curve of the bed on which Guenever is reclining.[32] Let me argue that the drawing is a seminal example of "making

---

Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 121-127.

31   David Jones, *Illustration to the Arthurian Legend: Guenever,* 1940, Tate Gallery, accessed 30 January 2019, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jones-illustration-to-the-arthurian-legend-guenever-n05315.

32   Whitaker, "Arthurian Art," 144–145.

the past present," in which the architectural motifs are central to evoking a sense of sacred space—and thereby a sense of timelessness—on the one hand, and on the other to providing the image with a *visual* cohesion regardless of its diffuse allusions, both visual and *textual*.

Thus, I interpret the final scenes of *In Parenthesis* along similar lines. In one reading, the Battle of Mametz Wood offers an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy," of which the text attempts to make sense through diffuse—often contradictory—refences to various discourses of the past. The human world is in the state of chaos and disintegration, which may be best exemplified by the metaphorical-metonymical vision of the human body—the wounded soldier—in the dialogue of the medics carrying it on a stretcher: "you mustn't spill the precious fragments, for perhaps these raw bones live."[33] The natural world seems to offer "refuge,"[34] but as to the nature of that shelter, the text seems already divided against itself. That is, what is represented as the pagan "mother earth"[35] in one moment, in another gives place to the Christian myth, a vision of *Pieta,* "Mother of Christ under the tree,"[36] as an imaginary extension of reality: soldiers die sitting under the trees, leaning their back against them. Nonetheless, making the soldiers' sacrifice meaningful through a parallel with Christ is just one in a multitude of narratives evoked here, all of which inevitably try to make sense of the present through the historical or mythic past. Thus, such tragic figures are mentioned as the half-historical, half-mythical 7th-century King of Wales, Cadwaladr,[37] or

---

33   David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937) (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1963), 175.
34   Ibid., 176.
35   Ibid.
36   Ibid., 177.
37   Ibid., 181.

Harold Hardrada,[38] whose campaign to claim the English throne was instrumental to the defeat which King Harold suffered from William the Conqueror. A short reference to the "Golden Bough"[39] recalls not only a well-known mythic narrative, but also James Frazer's immensely influential metanarrative—in fact, a seminal academic attempt to create order in the chaotic universe of myths by using one specific mythical narrative. Equally tragic and controversial are the connotations of literary scenes proper which Jones mentions, for example those of the moving "Birnam copse" from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.[40] This list of diffuse historical, mythical, and literary references outside the three fundamental intertexts discussed by Robichaud could be continued for long.

This effect of bodily and textual disintegration is countered by attempts to achieve cohesion in the manner of the drawing *Guenever,* with the help of visual—architectural—unity, which, however, by necessity must be realised in the textual, verbal medium. Analogically to that drawing, Jones places the final battle scene within the sacred space of a chapel, more precisely of St. John's Chapel in White Tower, London, by (in)directly evoking it in two references framing the entire narrative. The first of these evokes the story of Bran's head with the added paratextual weight of a motto: the dedication of *In Parenthesis* is directly followed by a short excerpt from "Branwen the Daughter of Llyr" in the *Mabinogion*:

> Evil betide me if I do not open the door to know if that is true which is said concerning it. So he opened the door [...] and when they had looked, they were conscious of all the evils they had ever sustained, and of all the friends and companions they had lost and of all the

---

38   Ibid., 182.
39   Ibid., 178.
40   Ibid.

misery that had befallen them, as if all had happened in that very spot; […] and because of their perturbation they could not rest.[41]

The context of the quote takes readers to the latter sections of the mythic narrative, which relate what happened to the warriors of Bran on their way home after the disastrous Irish war. Carrying the head of their dead giant leader with them, they spend a long and merry time in Harlech, because they fall into oblivion and do not remember their sorrows. The excerpt itself tells how they wake up from their stupor when one of them opens a door: it describes in no uncertain terms—terms Freud might have been proud of—the eternal presence of the traumatic experience. It is on that note of timelessness that Jones's narrative of the Battle of the Somme begins, rather than on the note of eternity associated with sacred space. When Bran's warriors move on, they bury the head in the White Tower— which, according to lore, guarantees the safety of Britain as long as it remains there. That hidden connotation of the intertext, however, is revealed only in the description of the final battle, when the White Tower is mentioned.[42]

Though the two textual references to Bran's head and its burial in the White Tower of London conspicuously enframe *In Parenthesis*, they do not—cannot—create on their own the effect of placing it within a sacred space. Key to that and the impression of cohesion is the visual effect accompanying the second mention of the White Tower: the description of Mametz Wood as a medieval church interior. It is metaphorically identified with the "perilous altar-house for a White Tower,"[43] the chapel of that 11th-century historical building, if you like, which is

41   *The Mabinogion*, 26; Jones, *In Parenthesis*, motto, omissions in the original.
42   Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 182; cf. *The Mabinogion*, 27.
43   Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 182.

even named in a note added to Part 7.[44] The woods have a "tree-roofing,"[45] and the "cool interior aisles, where the light came muted, filtered from high up traceries"[46] recall gothic cathedrals. A third, subterranean level of the church building completes this image: "Down in the under-croft, in the crypt of the wood, clammy drippings percolate—and wide-girth boled the eccentric colonnade."[47].

It is in this potentially sacred space that a timeless union of the natural and the human environment is created. It becomes hard "to distinguish men from walking trees and branchy moving like a Birnam copse."[48] The metaphorical identification of the trees with the dying soldiers is intensified as the bodies of the latter—also visualised as sculptures of the royal dead on tombs in cathedrals—are melted into the tree trunks, while the trees themselves become humanised through personification:

> Aisle-ways bunged-up between these columns rising,
> these long strangers,
> under this vaulting stare upward
> for recumbent princes of his people.
> Stone lords coiffed …[49]
>
> The trees of the wood beware each other
> and under each a man sitting;
> their seemly face as carved in a sardonyx stone; as undi-
> ademed princes turn their gracious profiles in a hidden
> sea, so did these appear, under the changing light.[50]

---

44   Ibid., 223, n. 37.
45   Ibid., 181.
46   Ibid., 171.
47   Ibid., 182.
48   Ibid., 179.
49   Ibid., 182.
50   Ibid., 184.

Dying men petrified into sculptures are united with the columns of the trees to ultimately form inalienable parts of the metaphorical church building—the burial place of Bran's head and the safeguard of Britain, which was so carelessly meddled with by King Arthur—in a timeless repetition of Christ's sacrifice. It is the visual image of the chapel building that is largely responsible for the effect of unity and cohesion produced here, which also encompasses the otherwise diffuse intertextual layers of Jones's text.

I hope to have demonstrated that although the concept of Eliot's "mythic method" is highly relevant to an understanding of David Jones's monumental reimagining of the trauma of the Great War, a consideration of his visual art might shed light on the nuanced details of how he represents history by turning the tradition of the past into a lived present. Though the significance of the literary tradition, of historical and mythical intertexts is unquestionable in this respect, Jones's artistic practice seems also to have largely contributed to *In Parenthesis*, a fascinating modernist text which relies just as importantly on Jones's visual evocations of the past, the medieval—prominently the Arthurian—heritage in combination with medieval embodiments of sacred space. Indeed, recalling that space in text or image seems to have a compositional function in both media for him, which creates a visual coherence of interpretation, in its quality of the sacred lifted beyond the failed textual attempts at a "mythic method." While this visual effect foregrounds a Christian reading of the final scene, the component of timelessness carries alternative connotations in the interwar context. Jones seems to create a shrine not only for the soldiers' sacrifice, but also for the shreds of culture he evokes to create its monument. The all-encompassing nature of both his intertextual references and his representation of diverse linguistic registers appears in a new light when placed "in parenthesis," in the frame of two evocations of timelessness. They become

significant in their self-referentiality, as parts of the en-
cyclopaedic urge to preserve—in a shrine or, to return to
Jones's own concept of his art, in an ark—the linguistic
and textual totality of a world constantly threatened with
total self-annihilation by the horrors of modern civiliza-
tion. Enframed in a scene of eternity, for eternity, this cul-
ture (of war) is only apparently contained in a time capsule
of memory: the very timelessness of the scene also evokes
the eternal present of the re-lived traumatic experience
as established in the motto of *In Parenthesis.* Apparently
infinite in time, the war appropriates the exterior of the
text, so there appears nothing outside it, or at least nothing
worth writing about: "The geste says this and the man who
was on the field … and who wrote the book … the man
who does not know this has not understood anything."[51]

It is in the light of interwar anxieties and the threat of
total annihilation that Jones's omission of victory becomes
especially meaningful, and it becomes clear why and how
heroism in the traditional sense is impossible in his epic
poem. To create a memento and a warning of that as the
sole purpose of art, *In Parenthesis* still must attempt to
reunite the fragments of chaotic existence.

---

51   *The Song of Roland* qtd. in Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 187,
omissions in the original.

Chloé Thomas

PROPHECY AND MODERNIST MODES OF NARRATION: THE WAR WRITINGS OF GERTRUDE STEIN

Introduction

The Latin word *vates*, meaning both "poet" and "prophet"—"seers" by trade—reminds us of the historical interrelation of these two professions. The word made its way through Old Celtic into modern English, as *vates* or *ovate*, to designate ancient bards or their neo-druidic equivalents in modern times. Blind visionaries, from Homer to Milton, are often soothsayers, and they give their prophecies in verse. But after the Romantic reaction, one would have expected poetry to distance itself from the prophetic paradigm. In many respects, Modernism embraced the technological and scientific ethos of its time, which should have made it averse to the esotericism of an earlier time. Yet modernist poetry is full of prophets. In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, there is a "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante" (l. 43), and more importantly perhaps Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology, who speaks of his visions in the "unreal city" that is modern London. Tiresias also appears in Pound's *Cantos*, redoubling "poor old Homer blind"[1] as Pound's model and counter-model. For Eliot and Pound, these prophets are referential: they are one of the means to invite a certain, carefully chosen poetic tradition into their own productions. Homer and Tiresias, especially in Pound's use of them, are symptoms of the conflation

---

1   Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, A New Directions Book (New York: New Directions, 1989), 124.

of literary history that is at work: a history which is no longer organised along a chronological line, but is rather a bottomless and chaotic well of references from which to pick up forebears. That they are prophets, to Pound and Eliot, does not mean so much that they are able to see and foretell the future, but that they partake, as historical and mythological characters, to the general reconsideration of historical linearity by Modernism, especially as far as cultural and literary history is concerned. Pound (in "Usura" most strikingly) also took up the tone and power of these forefathers to serve his own poetic and political discourse in which futurism ultimately met fascism. Other poets, Yeats and H.D. most famously, got interested in Spiritism. Their troubled relationship to modernity may explain their taste for a practice that is future-oriented but also reminiscent of ancient practices, stemming from idealised times. In *Trilogy*, written towards the end of the Second World War, H.D. kept identifying her own lyric "I" with the ancient voices of mythical prophets and, through them, to defend a temporality that is non-linear, alternative, and irrational. "This is the age of the new dimension"[2]: the line, followed by an explicit call to "surrender / sterile logic, trivial reason," is at odds with the dominant Cartesian paradigm of technological modernity; similarly, H.D., who underwent an analysis with Sigmund Freud in Vienna, was always adamant that her "visions" should be taken as gifts, not symptoms.

It is probably no accident that H.D.'s visions particularly developed during the war, at a time when the poet was living in London under the Blitz. A number of recent studies have endeavoured to consider the somewhat surprising, and, for a long time, glossed-over, relationship of Modernism towards Spiritism; in 1995, Timothy Materer published *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult*,

---

2   H. D, *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 40.

which drew on this connection to explore the dark side of poetry in the first half of the 20th century.[3] More recently, Devin Johnston analysed contemporary American poetry as an "occult practice,"[4] considering the influence of Modernism (in particular through the H.D.-Duncan connection) over later poets in this respect. In his chapter on H.D., Johnston shows that the Second World War was an essential context for the emergence of the poet's interest in visions, séances, and spiritualism.

Gertrude Stein, another American poet of H.D.'s generation, also turned to prophecy during the Second World War. Yet she is little, if ever, mentioned in studies on occultism, and her take at spiritualism is an entirely different one. Stein, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1874, studied experimental psychology with William James and even started a degree in medicine. Her first prose writings, *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, display a continued faith in the 19th-century positivism which was paradigmatic to her scientific education. It is significant that her very first published text, an academic paper entitled "Normal Motor Automatism" which she co-authored with her classmate Leon Solomons in 1894, began by distancing the proposed experiment from any kind of spiritualistic leaning: "For these experiments a planchette was used. Both of us [Stein and Solomons] had previously tried in vain to "write planchette." Neither of us has any aptitude for willing games, etc."[5]

The planchette, in the late 19th century, consisted of a small board mounted on wheels and fitted with a pencil.

---

3   Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

4   Devin Johnston, *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

5   Gertrude Stein and Leon M. Solomons, "Normal Motor Automatism," *Psychological Review*, 3.5 (1896), 494.

During séances, one would hold the pencil while letting the hand rest on the planchette and allow it to be guided by a spirit wishing to spell out a message. Here, it is explicitly transformed to serve a scientific experiment whose authors are adamant that, despite its forays into the limits of consciousness, it must not be mistaken for any sort of drawing-room game ("willing games" toy with telepathy) involving spirits and otherworldly voices.

It is all the more surprising, then, that half a century after this rather strong statement, Gertrude Stein turned to a series of occult sources to try and predict the outcome of the war. In the process, she completely reframed Modernism's relationship to prophecy, by making of it not a mode of poetic inspiration, but a very particular narrative device.

From poetry to prose: the war writings of Gertrude Stein

Already in her novel *Ida*, which she began in the late 1930s, Stein had shown evidence of an interest in "signs" and superstitions. But it is really in her texts from the 1940s that she gave full sway to her so far repressed or absent occult tendencies. In an unpublished text from 1946 about the end of the Second World War, "Raoul Dufy is pleasure," she wrote, retrospectively: "All through the war I had been superstitious."[6] The use of the past perfect here might be apologetic; in any case, it makes clear the connection between the geopolitical context and Stein's turn to prophecies. However, it must be noted that, although she had also spent the First World War in France, she had not felt the need at the time to turn to esoteric writings. The situation was different in the Second World War, even though her war writings used the same detached,

---

6   Gertrude Stein, "Epsom, Chantilly, Deauville Vus Par Raoul Dufy" (Paris, 1946), Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

casual tone. Maybe Stein and her partner Alice Toklas felt more endangered this time. Indeed, although they were American, of Jewish decent and overtly homosexual, they had decided to remain in France during the Second World War, despite many warnings from their friends. Stein and Toklas were convinced that they were under the protection of Bernard Faÿ, a prominent professor of English who had been Stein's friend and translator and had turned an ardent supporter and actor of the Vichy regime.[7] They spent the war in the Rhône valley, where Stein had her country home.

An easy way to account for Stein's interest in prophecy, then, is to suggest that the pervading fear with which she had to live made her more sensitive to non-standard discourses. But the contradiction with Stein's original positivistic faith remains. By looking at her war writings from the 1940s, one is led to the hypothesis that her use of prophecies is only superficially the symptom of a late interest in the occult, and that it is rather to be understood in the context of the broader conception of history that Stein had evolved throughout her long career.

My main sources are Stein's narratives *Paris France*, first published in April 1940, which she had begun before the outbreak of the war and which continued as a testimony

---

7   On Faÿ, see Antoine Compagnon, *Le cas Bernard Faÿ: du Collège de France à l'indignité nationale*, La suite des temps, (Paris: Gallimard, 2009); on Stein's war years, see the dossier edited by Charles Bernstein, "Gertrude Stein's War Years: Setting the Record Straight, a Dossier," *Jacket 2* <http://jacket2. org/feature/gertrude-steins-war-years-setting-record-straight> [accessed 5 August 2016]. In particular, in this dossier, Logan Esdale discusses Barbara Will's controversial book, *Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Faÿ, and the Vichy Dilemma*, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

of the "*drôle de guerre*" before the French defeat[8]; "The Winner Loses: A Picture of Occupied France," a piece she wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* in November, 1940, after the June armistice[9]; *Wars I Have Seen*, a sequel of sorts to *Paris France* which Stein began in early 1943; published in 1945, it accounts for Stein's war years in the Rhône valley and her return to Paris after the Liberation.[10] In this period, Stein also wrote a novel, *Mrs Reynolds,*[11] published posthumously, about one Angel Harper and one Joseph Lane, two characters rather transparently standing for Hitler and Stalin. Finally, she wrote shortly after the war "Raoul Dufy is pleasure," which remains unpublished to this day in English, but appeared in French translation early on. Stein died in 1946, and these are her last writings.

It must be noted that all these sources are prose ones. Stein had begun her literary career as a prose writer before turning to poetry and drama in the early 1910s, while continuing her experiments in narrative forms, mainly autobiographical by the mid-1930s. Contrary to the war poetry of H.D., then, the war writings of Gertrude Stein do not *enact* prophecy. They simply tell of how they make use of it; in so doing, they do not give themselves a prophetic voice, but account for the use of the prophecies of others. The essentially *narrative* quality of these texts is not

---

8   Gertrude Stein, *Paris France* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1940).

9   Gertrude Stein, "The Winner Loses," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1940; reprinted in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, edited by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1946), 543-66.

10   Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (New York: Random House, 1945); here the text is quoted in the 1984, more easily accessible edition reedition Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: Brilliance Books, 1984).

11   Gertrude Stein, *Mrs Reynolds and Five Earlier Novelettes*, Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), vol. ii.

contingent: it is key to understanding the relationship be-
tween prophecy and Stein's literary search for a particular
mode of narration.

Signs and superstitions

In these writings, Stein mentions a number of prophetic
sources in which she found evidence that France was, in
the end, going to win the war, and which provided some
sort of solace to Toklas and her. These texts are of differ-
ent natures. In "The Winner Loses," she first tells of an
English family living nearby supplying her with books in
English.

> One of the books they had I called the Bible; it was an
> astrological book called The Last Year of War, written
> by one Leonardo Blake. I burnt my copy the day of the
> signing of the armistice, but it certainly had been an
> enormous comfort to us all in between.[12]

The book in question, fully entitled *The Last Year of the
War and After*, was the work of an English astrologer, pub-
lished in 1940.[13] Basing himself on horoscopes of the Nazi
Party and other agents of the war, as well as on geopoliti-
cal considerations and mob psychology, Blake announced
in 1940 the unfolding of the war up to the defeat of Nazi
Germany.

In the same article, two other sources are mentioned,
no longer astrological but esoterically Catholic.

> Beside these astrological predictions there were oth-
> ers, and the ones they talked about most in the country
> were the predictions of the curé d'Ars. Ars is in this

---

12   Stein, "The Winner Loses," 544.

13   Leonardo Blake, *The Last Year of War and After*
(London: A. Dakers, 1940).

department of the Ain, and the curé, who died about
eighty years ago, became a saint; and he had predict-
ed that this year there would be a war and the wom-
en would have to sow the grain alone, but that the war
would be over in time for the men to get in the harvest;
and so when Alice Toklas sometimes worried about
how hot it would be all summer with the shutters closed
all the evening I said, 'Do not worry, the war will be
over before then; they cannot all be wrong.'[14]

The Curé of Ars,[15] also known as Saint Jean-Marie
Vianney, or Saint John Vianney in English, was a Catholic
preacher of the first half of the 19th century.[16] His parish
was located in the region where Stein had her country
home and where she spent the war. As Stein writes here,
his predictions were enjoying a large popularity in the
country. Recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church in
1925, Jean-Marie Vianney was, according to the canoni-
sation procedure, blessed with "intuition," and his sayings
were highly regarded for their prescient quality even be-
yond the small geographical area where he used to be ac-
tive as a priest. One finds here another reason which may
explain this late interest in "prophecies": the fact that Stein
found herself in the country, in a small village, and that she
was more exposed to local superstitions.
    Finally, "The Winner Loses" mentions, in passing, a
last source, immediately followed by a personal addition:

---

14   Stein, "The Winner Loses," 545.
15   Jean-Marie Vianney, *Sermons du vénérable serviteur
de Dieu Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, curé d'Ars*, 4 vols (Lyon:
Librairie générale catholique et classique, 1883).
16   For more on Vianney, see Philippe Boutry, *Prêtres et
paroisses au pays du curé d'Ars*, Histoire (Paris: Éd. du Cerf,
1986).

> […] then there was Sainte Odile, who said that after her
> blood flowed in June, four months after, France would
> be more glorious than ever. Well, why not?
> I had my own private prediction, and that was that when
> I had cut all the box hedges in the garden the war would
> be all over. Well, the box hedge is all cut now today, the
> eighth of August, but the war is not all over yet.[17]

Sainte Odile was an Alsatian Saint from the 7th century.
However, no known prophecy was attributed to her until,
in the midst of the First World War, one Georges Stoffler
published a pamphlet entitled *La Prophétie de Sainte-
Odile*, which he presented as a translation into French of a
Latin manuscript.[18] In it, Sainte Odile announces the de-
feat of what she calls "Germanie" (in French, the word
sounds archaic and medieval), and of its soldiers who, in-
terestingly, are supposed to be wearing spiked helmets just
like the Prussian army. Although there was no reason to
believe in the authenticity of the booklet, it proved very
successful in France during the First World War, and the
ultimate defeat of Germany in 1918 added to its credit.
Unsurprisingly, the text came again to be discussed during
the Second World War.

These three sources are regularly mentioned in Stein's
other war writings. Before moving to their role in these
texts, however, the addition of Stein's "own private predic-
tion" just after the mention of Sainte Odile must be com-
mented on. This "private prediction" focuses on a "sign,"
just like Sainte Odile's: her point is to affect a meaning
to a situation, to turn a state of facts into a prediction. It
echoes the role given to signs and superstitions in "The
Superstitions of Fred Anneday," a short text from the late

---

17   Stein, "The Winner Loses," 563.

18   Georges Stoffler, *La Prophétie de sainte Odile et la fin
de la guerre, avec notes et commentaires, par Georges Stoffler*
(Paris: Dorbon aîné, 1916).

1930s, later partly incorporated in the novel *Ida*: "What is superstition. Superstition is believing that something means anything and that anything means something and that each thing means a particular thing and will mean a particular thing is coming. Oh yes it does."[19]

In *Ida* (published in 1941, but which Stein had begun in 1937), the main character keeps looking for signs and finding them; but although she recognises them, she never states what they mean: they are "empty" signs, that have no other value than to state there is some meaning some-where, but never explicating that meaning. For example, "As she went she saw a nicely dressed little girl with a broken arm who threw a stone at a window. It was the little girl's right arm that was broken. This was a sign."[20] A sign of *what*? This is not told. But its mere existence seems soothing to Ida, as if it were enough to her that meanings existed. Signs are *meant* to be noticed, but they do not *mean* beyond their mere existence. This is to be compared to Stein's chosen "own private prediction" here: a meaning (the end of the war) is associated to a sign (the box hedges in the garden being all pruned) and one just has to wait for the sign to occur—an occurrence which is, interestingly, tightly controlled by the prophetess herself, as she is the one gardening. This reversal, which appears as an ultimate rejection of Stein's disdain of hermeneutics in *Ida* in fa-vour of a hypersemanticism, must be read in the light of the war—and the fear it entails—but also in the light of the autobiographical quality of the war writings. *Ida* used autobiographical material but was subtitled "A Novel" and remained a third-person narrative. "The Winner Loses," *Paris, France* and *Wars I Have Seen* are first-person tes-timonies, whose form is often very close to a diary. Their autobiographical quality is much less problematic than in

---

19   Qtd. in Gertrude Stein, *Ida: A Novel* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University press, 2012), 243-44.

20   Stein, *Ida: A Novel*, 619.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (in which it is Toklas, not Stein, who says "I") and *Everybody's Autobiography*, whose title announces that the first person always verges on the impersonal. Stein's later texts are often regarded as less experimental; but, more importantly, the urgency of her war writings made them more direct and, very often, a rather straight-forward record of their daily life. In these works, signs and prophecies become a way to keep *faith* in the historical developments one wishes for. That Stein's "sign" was proven wrong, in the end, does not seem very important: what matters is that her little invention helped her while the time away. When Stein said to Toklas, about the predictions of the Curé of Ars and of Leonardo Blake, "They cannot all be wrong," the effect is quite similar. It suggests not a blind faith in the esoteric sources she consults, but rather a distanced, almost amused, use of them. Superstitions, in that light, have value only in that they are soothing in the present, not in that they are actually proven right in the future. Stein here is even below the level of what her former professor William James called "the will to believe,"[21] arguing that belief could and sometimes should predate proof and could even be a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. To Stein, the actual fulfilling is secondary. This is precisely because the writings under study, written not reflectively but in the course of the events, are concerned with the present, with daily life. Their narrative mode does not so much rely on interpreting signs but on noticing their presence, on making them up in order to find in them a soothing company.

---

21   William James, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1897).

Prophecies and repetition

However, *Wars I Have Seen* in particular displays a secondary narrative mode which goes beyond the diary form and considers war as an abstract reality. Prophecies take on a quite different meaning in that case. When *Wars I Have Seen* was first published, its American publisher, Random House, presented it in an advertisement as a war testimony, almost as a journalistic text. It is true that, after the first few pages in which Stein ponders on the previous wars which she saw or heard of, the book is seemingly structured, at least partly, as a war chronicle. Stein accumulates local and daily anecdotes, focusing mostly on what they ate; and she regularly mentions a date as in passing ("and now here in June 1943…")[22] although without strictly respecting the form of a diary. What matters here is that, even if the word "now" is often repeated, it remains hard to place exactly. This is partly due to the book's exclusive focus on daily life; some major events of the war are mentioned (such as the Allied Invasion in Sicily) but they always appear secondary, and the effect produced is not that of a proper chronicle in which one may understand the progression of the war as an unfolding of events. It is rather a still life of sorts, in which the passing of time matters little.

This way of writing of food rather than politics is not, of course, politically neutral, and there would be much to say about Stein's naivety and even ambiguities. One may suggest that the centrality given to habits, hence to everything that repeats itself, is a way for Stein to put the actual war at a distance. This, in particular, has been argued by feminist critics who were interested in war narrative by female writers.[23] Moreover, Stein's interest in habit

---

22   Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 39.
23   Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Liesl M. Olson,

can be traced back to her work with William James, the philosopher; and her relationship to repetition or, as she would rather have it, insistence, is well known. But this consideration of habit also leads her to consider war itself as something that repeats itself. The title she chose for this book, *Wars I Have Seen*, is telling: even though it becomes a narrative of the Second World War, it begins with a list of all the wars she has previously seen or, more importantly, heard of and read about. As any American writer would, she begins with the Civil War and to what her parents remembered of it; but she also mentions her readings: historical novels, Shakespeare's plays, and even a narrative of the Indian Mutiny in Jules Verne. It is through narrative, she explains, that war can become "real" to her. Of her childhood she writes: "During these years there was no war, and if there was, it was not any war of mine. But of course there was history, and there were novels, historical novels, and so there was, in a way, war all the time."[24]

By turning the war into a literary trope, Stein protects herself from it; it is something that belongs to books and stays in them. Her own war narrative can no longer be regarded as a chronicle: by writing about her war, she makes it a-temporal. It has reality as a narrative, not as an experience. But in so doing she also makes it abstract, in a way: all historical wars belong to the same general past, that of books, and being tropes they have hardly anything specific about them: "It is funny about wars, they ought to be different but they are not."[25] She goes so far as to write that "It is the soothing thing about history that it does repeat itself."[26] This can be related to what she writes of her as-

---

"Gertrude Stein, William James, and Habit in the Shadow of War," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49.3 (2003): 328–59 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3175984>.

24   Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 7.
25   Ibid., 11.
26   Ibid., 96.

trological book: "the book of astrological predictions had predicted all these things, so we were all very satisfied."[27] Satisfaction comes from the confirmation that the book is right, not from the event itself (an allied victory); it is the "soothing" quality of history as a cycle.

In this light, one can reconsider Stein's use of prophecies. They are not so much meant to announce the future, but rather to claim that the future has always already happened, that it is going to be a mere re-writing of the past. "Re-writing," because the past repeats itself, and because it does so *in books*. Stein's understanding of history strangely reminisces of what is called the "typological reading" of the Scriptures: this mode of Biblical exegesis consisting in looking for "types" (archetypal figures or events) in the Old Testament, that are then repeated in the New Testament, and possibly afterwards. Typological reading was especially important for the Puritan founders of America, who related their own exile to that of the Hebrews and whose leaders compared themselves to Moses. Stemming from a Jewish family, Stein was not educated in Puritan theology, and there is no asserting that this parallelism was conscious on her part. However, as an American, she was out of necessity informed by this way of thinking and it is particularly striking that she comes to enact a similar narrative process as an American in exile. Through religious and non-religious sources, she secularises this particular reading of history, and it is probably no accident that she called the book by Leonardo Blake her "Bible."

As *Wars I Have Seen* progresses, the Biblical background becomes mythical: the reoccurrences of war times come to be presented as re-enactments of the story of Saint George slaying the dragon. By naming the saint, Stein refers to the Catholic version of an ancient myth, but by

---

27   Ibid., 177.

stating that Saint George can be replaced by any mythical hero, she eliminates the religious dimension. The myth is referred to in its barest form. "The dragon," she writes, is "the century," and each century has to be killed to let the new one be born. As for who slays the dragon, it does not really matter: Saint George, Siegfried, "anybody"; any myth will do, any hero; only types matter. "Saint George and the Dragon, Siegfried and the Dragon, anybody and the dragon, the dragon is always the century any century that anybody is trying to kill."[28] This fight against the dragon is the archetype of all wars, and wars have but one function, that of making modernity emerge. This is, once again, an endless cycle.

Towards a philosophy of history

There is, then, a contradictory movement: on the one hand, war is but the repetition of a pattern; on the other hand, it is what enables History to enter a linear progress towards an ever renewed modernity. In *Wars I Have Seen*, Stein defines war as a necessary part of each century, as a cyclical repetition that cannot be avoided. She personifies centuries and makes of each war the necessary "awkward age" of each of them, a crisis of sorts that marks the end of childhood and the entrance into adulthood, that is, modernity. That there were two major wars in the 20th century does not seem to bother her. The first one proved insufficient to kill the 19th century, which is why the second one was necessary: "The nineteenth century is taking from 1914 to 1943 to kill. It is hard to kill a century almost impossible."[29] That it can take two wars is a reminder that as soon as the dragon is slain, another one emerges, and that the fight for novelty is never to end. In a 1926 lecture given

---

28   Ibid., 16.
29   Ibid.

at Cambridge and Oxford, "Composition as Explanation," Stein stated that the First World War had been the catalyst for a decisive evolution of taste which had made possible the acceptance of her work.[30] In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), however, she situates the actual emergence of literary modernity somewhat earlier, in her novella "Melanctha," the second story of *Three Lives*, her first published book, which appeared in 1906: "Gertrude Stein had written the story of Melanctha the negress, the second story of *Three Lives* which was the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature."[31] By 1946, it seems in *Wars I Have Seen*, she has come to consider that this "first definite step away" had not been enough to actually "kill" the nineteenth century. The metaphor has become more violent in the process: the point is no longer to walk smoothly from one era to the next, but to slay and to bear.

"Modernity is a fight": Henri Meschonnic's statement ("*la modernité est un combat*") could have been Stein's motto. By looking for signs—astrological signs, religious signs, signs of her own invention—Stein was actually making up types: tropes that repeat themselves from one era to the next. Prophecies do not actually announce the future: they are the making place of these types. Stein's use of them is presented as voluntarily naïve; but they are a mise-en-abyme of Stein's own way of abstracting herself from the war: arranging *signs* and *typing* them—the only daily life possible to her.

---

30   Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*, The Hogarth Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1926).

31   Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1903-1932*, edited by Harriet Scott Chessman and Catharine R. Stimpson, Library of America (New York: Literary classics of the United States, 1998), 714.

Sanda Cordoș

REVOLUTION AS FRACTURED TIME IN
THE MODERNIST ROMANIAN NOVEL

Romanian modernism, or "wearing your shirt over your coat"

When still a young Romanian writer, Eugen Ionescu (1909-1994, later to become the illustrious French writer Eugène Ionesco, world promoter of the theatre of the absurd and member of the French Academy) published at the age of 25, in 1934, the pamphlet *Nu* ['No'], declaring war on the nativism that was ubiquitous at the time: "I dare suppose that every English poet is English. But he is first a poet and only afterwards English." The young author concluded in an exasperated tone: "Being merely native, only national, means indeed wearing one's shirt over one's coat."[1]

To borrow Ionescu's venomous yet emblematic phrase, "wearing one's shirt over one's coat" was a widespread custom in contemporaneous Romanian literary circles. In a country that was relatively recent and unstable (the last provinces with a Romanian ethnic majority had united with the Kingdom of Romania in 1918, at the end of WWI), with Romanianness still a fragile, well-nigh fictional identity, asserting one's creativity involved asserting one's nationality—or was downright subordinated to it. In the short history of literature proper—which started roughly in the early 19th century—Romanian writers had never been truly free of "historical circumstances," whether serving or resisting them—a fact duly noted and lambasted by the young Eugen Ionescu in the same pamphlet.

---

1   Eugen Ionescu, *Nu* (București: Humanitas, 1991), 150.

Almost all authors assumed, next to their creative ambition proper, also a missionary one on behalf of the country. Precisely for that reason, the oxymoronic statement Emil Cioran (1911-1995) made in the controversial book *Schimbarea la față a României* ['The Transfiguration of Romania,' 1936] is emblematic of the age: "I love the history of Romania with a hard loathing."[2]

The Romanian modernist literary circles (which also included Eugen Ionescu, and from where he wrote as a kind of *lupus in fabula*) did not exclude such dynamic, that is, the national preoccupations targeted by Ionescu and the sartorial habits of wearing the shirt over the coat. In a country that has always perceived itself as second-hand and lagging behind, forever ridden by a complex of belatedness with respect to the West,[3] modernisation—within which aesthetic modernism was often merely one part, one direction, one possibility—was a sustained desire, an aspiration akin to the horizon line: forever desired and never tangible. In effect, the two modernities, constantly discussed in the bibliography of this problem—one bourgeois (civilisatory), the other aesthetic, anti-bourgeois (artistic)—were closely interwoven in early 20th-century Romania. Writers from diverse backgrounds, groupings and generations alike would frame themselves as modernists and contribute to the selfsame ethos of national

---

2   Emil Cioran, *Schimbarea la față a României* (București: Humanitas, 1990), 42.

3   About these inferiority complexes that fertilise the consciousness of Romania's modernity, the influential critic Mircea Martin writes, "These complexes of inferiority follow Romanian literature like a shadow and ... by the force of events, literature's modern self-consciousness is unimaginable without admitting them." *George Călinescu și „complexele" literaturii române* ['George Călinescu and the "Complexes" of Romanian Literature'] (București: Albatros, 1981), 27.

modernisation in their variegated voices and registers[4];
this ethos was always interwoven with nationhood.

The champion of literary modernism by virtue of his
authority and sustained efforts was the critic and literary
historian Eugen Lovinescu (1881-1943). It is no accident
that in parallel with his impetuous literary activity both
in literary journalism and as leader of a literary circle,
means by which he attempted to impose a modernist and
pro-Western orientation to national literature, Lovinescu
published his massive *Istoria civilizaţiei române mod-
erne* ['The History of Modern Romanian Civilisation,'
1924-1926]. The book's principal thesis is, "In our cen-
tury, where we find ourselves, light comes from the West:
ex occidente lux! Thus for us progress cannot but mean
the fertilisation of the national soil with the creative ele-
ments of Western ideology."[5] Only later would he publish
Istoria literaturii române contemporane ['The History of
Contemporary Romanian Literature,' 1926-1929], again
with a scaffolding of modernist ideas. Whether writing
about the social panorama or the dynamics of literature
proper, for Lovinescu the coveted and vital modernity
means sustained contact with Western Europe and the

---

4   The critic Ion Bogdan Lefter rightfully observes that
the traditionalist-modernist debate in fact engages the "national
destiny": "In other European cultures there was already an es-
tablished tradition of the confrontation between 'old' and 'new'.
Lacking such a tradition, we have fashioned the couple tradi-
tionalism-modernism into a paradigmatic emblem of opposition.
The battles around this dichotomy have involved great forces
and the great themes mentioned earlier, the core of the debate
being, in fact, the destiny of the nation." Ion Bogdan Lefter,
*Recapitularea modernităţii. Pentru o nouă istorie a literaturii
române* ['The Reprise of Modernity. Towards a New History
of Romanian Literature'], 2nd ed., with an Epilogue about neo-
modernism (Piteşti: Paralela 45, 2012), 204.

5   Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizaţiei române moderne*
(Bucureşti: Minerva, 1997), 13.

adoption by imitation of some of its principles and values. With an important caveat, set down in his *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, where imitation is defined as assimilation: "If imitation is reduced, to borrow Anatole France's comparison, to the act by which an ant takes possession of a breadcrumb thoroughly but does not build upon it, then it has no value whatsoever: literature cannot live by such imitation ... but if, on the contrary, it means the bee's process of assimilation and construction, then it is necessary and in reality it constitutes a natural process"; moreover, "imitation is the most common way of being original."[6]

Almost one generation younger than Lovinescu, Ion Vinea (1895-1964) was an important catalyst of the leftist avant-garde scene, which he attempted to export to his well-beloved West with the help of his friend Tristan Tzara; he was editor-in-chief, with Marcel Iancu, of the atypically long-lived magazine *Contimporanul* ["'The Contemporary,' 1922-1932]. It is worth mentioning that in the first, program-setting issue of this arts magazine, published on June 13, 1922, the editor-in-chief bemoaned the fact that "Never have political mores been more Asian, their gestures more roguish, and the back that bears them more humble than now, when crime becomes the current means of governance and wailing, the sole delict of resistance." Yet the greatest responsibility was not of the body politic but of the public, "splaying on the hay of its traditional indifference, with its Greater Romania drawn in the heart of European civilisation, like a swamp strewn with rotting carcasses, eggshells and watermelon peels in the

---

6   Ibid., vol. I, 122. The most complex, rehistoricising and contextualising reading of Lovinescu's conception of modernity is Teodora Dumitru's *Modernitatea politică şi literară în gândirea lui E. Lovinescu* ['Political and Literary Modernity in E. Lovinescu's Thought'] (București: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2016).

midst of an asphalted courtyard." From here it follows that the new magazine set itself the task of "forging ... a new mentality," "awakening this public to self-awareness."[7]

The last writer I would like to discuss for illustrating how Romanian modernism interweaves the artistic with the national—wearing its shirt over the coat, to cite Ionescu's metaphor again—is Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). Considered the leader of the very young literary generation that emerged after the unification of Romania, the so-called generation of 1927, he published several manifesto-like articles in *Cuvântul* ['The Word'], urging his peers to express "our authentic inner being"[8] in their art. Several months later the emerging young author was more explicit, as well as more exasperated when it came to the correlation between artistic creativity and the national, writing, in the notorious article "Anno Domini" (Jan. 2, 1928), "Let us steer clear, once and for all, of the declamations of souls moved to tears by the tricolour!"[9] One decade later we find the same Eliade, firmly entrenched in the political right, next to the pro-Nazi Iron Guard, preoccupied by "the mission of Romania": in one of his articles published in *Vremea* ['The Time,' February 28, 1937] and titled appositely, "De unde începe misiunea României?" ['Where Does Romania's Mission Start From?'], he glimpsed "the destiny of modern Romania" steered "by the sign of the Cross."[10]

---

7   Ion Vinea, *Opere*, Vol. V: *Publicistica* (1920-1924) ['Collected Works: Journalism'] (București: Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, Institutul de Istorie și Teorie literară „G. Călinescu," 2003), 294-295.

8   "Linii de orientare" ['Directions'], Sept. 6, 1927, reproduced in Eliade, *Profetism românesc* ['Romanian Prophecy], vol'. I-II (București: Roza Vînturilor, 1990), vol. I, 22.

9   Ibid., 127.

10   Mircea Eliade, *Texte „legionare" și despre „românism"* ['"Legionary" Texts and Essays on "Romanianness"']

Historicising Romanian modernism

Researchers tend to agree that a chronology of modernism in Romania spans the period between 1880 and 1948, with a peak of intensity (both in terms of programme and practice) in the interval 1925-1948.[11] After socialist realism was imposed, in 1948, under the new Communist regime, as the sole and irrefutable aesthetic ideology, modernism as an artistic current was banned, since it hailed from the decadent West and expressed its dangerous and adversary ideology. After 1960 and especially 1965, at the time of the ideological thaw, when more means of expression become tolerated, modernism returned with the force of the repressed. Literary critics like Ion Bogdan Lefter term this postwar phenomenon neomodernism and consider it to have been active until around 1980. Sorin Alexandrescu points at the still felt and ominous, social as well as cultural consequences of the country's brutal exit from modernity: "*Romania never exited modernity, Romania was robbed of its modernity*, being forced by Ceaușescu to regress to the premodern behaviours and mentalities that it still suffers from."[12]

(Cluj, Dacia, 2001), 18.

11   See especially Sorin Alexandrescu, *Privind înapoi, modernitatea* ['Modernity, at a Retrospective Glance'], translated by M. Adăscăliței, Ș. Anghelescu, M. Chirițescu, R. Jugureanu (București: Univers, 1999), 130; Gabriela Omăt (ed.), *Modernismul literar românesc în date (1880-2000) și texte (1880-1949)*, vol. I-II ['A Chronology of Romanian Literary Modernism (1880-2000) and texts (1880-1949)] (București: Institutul Cultural Român, 2008), 12; Ion Bogdan Lefter, *Recapitularea modernității*, 230-231.

12   Ibid., p. 340, emph. in orig.

The relation between modernity and revolution

From as early as 1848, when the revolution that broke out in France was joined by Romanian youth who later tried to import it to Romania, successive generations consistently regarded revolution, despite their differing views, as a fast alley for escaping belatedness, for burning the middle stages (to employ a by-now familiar phrase[13])—in short, to ensure modernisation.[14] Lovinescu unequivocally stressed this in the conclusions to his *History of Modern Romanian Civilisation*: "As in the case of other belated peoples (and we have studied the cases of Russia and Japan), our civilisation cannot form itself in any other manner but a revolutionary one, that is, abruptly, by importing it whole, and without replicating the evolutionary stages of the civilisation of developed nations through organic growth."[15] As for Ion Vinea, after decades of writing both in *Contimporanul* and in *Facla* ('The Torch,' a magazine with a strong social orientation that he also edited), he was a staunch

---

13   Paul Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc* ['The Origins of Romanian Romanticism'] (București: Minerva, 1972). Another researcher who tackles this belated temporality of Romania, Sorin Alexandrescu, writes: "If there were one temporal myth in Romanian culture, I would deduce it from this desperate effort at recovering lost time." He also identifies the problem of the "desperate run forward, to recover the temporal backlag with respect to Western civilisation." *Paradoxul român* ['The Romanian Paradox'] (București: Univers, 1998), 35, 37.

14   Marta Petreu, an expert on the period, states that "In interwar Romania the idea of a revolution that would erase the existing order and install a new order and a felicitous 'new world' was continuously invoked." *De la Junimea la Noica. Studii de cultură românească* ['From the Magazine *Junimea* to Noica. Studies on Romanian Culture'] (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 299. On the period's messianic "revolutionism" that was embraced especially by the young generation of 1927, see Petreu, 251-343.

15   Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, 353.

supporter of social revolution and expressed his endorse-
ment of the 1789 French and 1917 Soviet revolutions. He
firmly believed that artistic revolution—primarily of the
avant-garde—was our great chance of synchronising with
Western literature. As he wrote in the article "Promisiuni"
['Promises'] published in the November-December 1922
issue of *Contimporanul*: "an International of avant-garde
publications across the world, creating an atmosphere of
emulation and mutual support across borders, of direction
exchanges and inspiration, that will lead to the ultimate
discovery of the sought-after style of our time, and of the
unified planet. An intellectual International has come into
being, almost unawares, without congresses, programmes
or propaganda funds and, fuelled by the selfsame needs
and driven by the same calling, with clarity it planted forth
its ideal."[16]

In his texts from the late 1930s, the young Mircea
Eliade—the   representative,   according   to   Sorin
Alexandrescu, of an "ethical modernism"[17]—advocated the
necessity of a *Christian spiritual revolution*, for instance
in his article "Popor fără misiune?!..." ['A people without
mission?!'], published on Dec. 1, 1935: "Messianism, just
like revolution, starts by creating new forms of life, by cre-
ating a new consciousness ... The revolutionary lifestyle is,
above all, *creative*."[18]

---

16   Ion Vinea, *Opere*, Vol. V: *Publicistica*, 433.

17   See Alexandrescu, *Privind înapoi, modernitatea*, 6,
137; see also Sorin Alexandrescu, "Modernism și anti-mod-
ernism. Din nou, cazul românesc" ['Modernism and Anti-
modernism. Once again, on the Romanian Case'] in Sorin Antohi
(ed.), *Modernism și antimodernitate. Noi perspective interdisci-
plinare* ['Modernism and Anti-modernity. New Interdisciplinary
Perspectives'] (București: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2008),
140 ff.

18   Mircea Eliade, *Profetism românesc*, vol. II, 137, emph.
in orig.; *Texte „legionare,"* 73-74.

Revolution gradually became a ubiquitous theme of fiction, shaping a short-circuiting temporality by which Romania's modernisation could be accelerated. This image can be found in novels that position themselves as aesthetically advanced instantiations of modernism. Later, in neomodernism, however, revolution is treated dichotomically, as fractured or disjointed time that harms the human being irreparably.

Revolution as accelerated time

Although he had no strong political commitments, Liviu Rebreanu was one of the great early 20th-century writers preoccupied with revolution (1885-1944).[19] Constantly harnessing in his writing the instinctual, abyssal drives of the human being, Rebreanu extended his investigations from the individual (a dominating concern novels like *Ion* or *Pădurea spânzuraților* ['Forest of the Hanged']) to the masses in *Crăişorul Horia* ['Little King Horia,' 1929] and *Răscoala* ['The Uprising,' 1932]. The latter two novels foreground the problem of the psychology of the masses at the time of major events in the Romanian people's history (in the first novel, the 1784 peasants' revolt led by Horia, Cloșca and Crișan in Transylvania; in the second, the peasant uprising of 1907). Obviously, regardless of the event and its historical date, the social principle—represented in the narrative through dire references to poverty, starvation and disease—remains the same: injustice. Having arrived in Vienna and waiting for an audience with the emperor, Horia utters it with unequivocal clarity

---

19   The theme of the revolution is present in Rebreanu's journalistic output from 1914, when he publishes the article "Revoluția lui Horia, Cloșca și Crișan" ['The Revolution of Horia, Cloșca and Crișan'] in two issues of the magazine *Universul literar* ['Literary Universe']: *Opere* ['Collected Works'], vol. 16 (București: Minerva, 1995), 104-117.

during a conversation with a congenial notary: "We cannot go on living without justice, without laws."[20] In *Răscoala,* a similar statement is made by the witness-character Titu Herdelea: "The law defeats the revolution. Only lawlessness provokes and spreads revolutions!"[21] Rebreanu is interested in the irrational mechanisms whereby collective violence– which is by definition aleatory and uncontrollable—is unleashed. What happens when an amorphous, silent and patient mass is possessed by fury and passes—to borrow a phrase from *Crăișorul Horia* — from the "time of forgiveness" to the "time of retribution,"[22] or—to borrow a phrase from *Răscoala* —when "spirits are too agitated because of starvation and squalor."[23] As a good strategist, Horia grasps that in order to mobilise the "serf multitudes" against injustice, some "bait, magic word or extraordinary sign" is needed.[24] Thus he inflames the "downtrodden poor"[25] and starts off the "rebellion" under the sign of the imperial command. However paradoxical it might seem, the vision mediated in *Crăișorul Horia* is that of *revolution as an imperial command.* Similarly, in *Răscoala* the peasants rise up heeding the words of a spectre that nonetheless appears quite real to them: the horsemen of the Voivode go from village to village announcing the peasants that he has *ordered* them to divide the boyars' lands among themselves. Once unleashed, the fury of the mass is uncontrollable: if in *Crăișorul Horia* "the surge had come as quick as lightning,"[26] in *Răscoala* the

20   Liviu Rebreanu, *Opere* ['Collected Works'] vol. 7 (București: Minerva, 1975), 173.

21   Ibid., vol. 8 (București: Minerva, 1975), 549.

22   Ibid., vol. 7, 242.

23   Ibid., vol. 8, 263.

24   Ibid., vol. 7, 220.

25   Ibid., 179.

26   Ibid., 245.

mob "manifests itself fatally in outbursts of savagery," the "never-seen upheavals"[27] including arson, crime and rape.

Since Rebreanu is no partisan of any ideology that he would express in some form in his writing, he—again atypically for 20th-century literature—superscribes the revolution with Biblical matrices, transforming collective violence into sacred violence. Thus, in *Crăișorul Horia* the quenching of the uprising and the walk of the, by now legendary, leader to the breaking wheel recalls Golgotha. In *Răscoala* the uprising becomes an apocalypse announced not only by the "sound of the trumpet, so merciless and threatening" punctuated by "copper shrieks"[28] that rise from the regiment entrusted with repressing the revolt, but also explained by Anton the village idiot, who hears the "commandments trumpeting in the skies" and proclaiming "the great final judgement" of God.[29]

Some of the writers who are also activists in leftist circles carry over the image of the revolution into their fiction. Such is the case of N. D. Cocea (1880-1949), whose novel *Fecior de slugă* ['The Houseboy,' 1932] has as protagonists the servant boy Tănase Bojoceanu and Nelu Azan, who grow up together and develop a close friendship in the house of Colonel Hotnog, a former hero of the war of independence. The former grows into a social upstart, becoming a police commissioner without scruples. Solely interested in rapid career advancement, he persecutes bolsheviks whom he whole-heartedly hates as beings bereft of humanity, "beasts" and "predators." Nelu Azan is the colonel's nephew, a leftist intellectual who is subversively plotting social upheaval. In the novel's closing episode Tănase denounces the pro-bolshevik Nelu at the *Siguranța* (the Secret Police) for having set up a clandestine print in the stables. Up to that point though this novel of (social)

---

27   Ibid., vol. 8, 497, 502.
28   Ibid., 510, 512.
29   Ibid., 540.

adventure also presents the reader with pages of the characters at table talk about social classes and injustice, projecting the revolution. Arriving at Nelu's unannounced, Tănase finds here Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Dr. Cantacuzino, professor Voinov, professor Parhon and the socialist frontman I. C. Frimu, all real-life personalities of the Romanian left. The first even gives a definition of revolution as a "belated evolution."[30] I. C. Frimu makes a distinction between workers and domestic servants: "in this country of servants we the workers are the only ones who try to shed the souls of servants and the habits of servants."[31] Later in the book the 19-year-old, Bessarabia-born bolshevik Lenuța also appears, a student of the arts and law who comes from a working-class family; she explains to Nelu that the "boundaries between classes" are harder than those that divide countries: "there's an abyss between us."[32]

A man from Bessarabia, Vania Răutu, born in a boyar's family in the smalltown of Năpădeni is the protagonist of the novel *În preajma revoluției* ['On the Verge of the Revolutiom' 1931-1936) by C. Stere (1865-1936). Although the novel was banned during the Communist regime in Romania, Vania's biography becomes somewhat standardised and borrowed by an entire subgroup of fiction: just like Vania, almost all the revolutionaries in the postwar novels are unloved or at the very least not accepted by their families. They are "intruders in the family nest," hounded by mother and siblings and seen as a "wolf cub."[33] Vania's true family will be the revolutionary cell— first discovered during high school in Chișinău. There,

---

30   Nicolae Cocea, *Scrieri*, vol. II (București: Minerva, 1970), 237.

31   Ibid., 257.

32   Ibid., 262.

33   Constantin Stere, *În preajma revoluției,* vol. I-II (București: Cartea Românească, 1991), I, 140, 272.

besides cultivating his inborn social sensitivity, he has the opportunity to read seminal works, among them Marx's *Capital,* "this gospel of socialism."[34] For his seditionary activities the young Răutu is deported to Siberia for three years. The novel occasionally lapses into a catechism of the revolutionary, with theses such as, "Conspiracy is the revolutionary's first duty," or, "In revolution no individual initiatives are allowed."[35] Vania's reticence towards "pure revolution," in which "all the profound mysticism of Russian nature" is reflected, is also noteworthy.[36] Moved by his conviction, but also by nostalgia for unknown Romania after his return from Siberia, the young man manages to cross the river Prut into Romania, animated by the idea that "the social revolution is imminent, according to Engels's prophecy."[37]

Under the sign (or motto) of Engels combined with Lautréamont stands *Fata morgana* (1937), a novel by Gherasim Luca (1913-1994). Written in a register of avant-garde opposition and in a mode of ambiguity between the dreamlike and the real, the idyllic and the monstrous, the novel follows the trajectory of the young Fișer, a merchant's son from Sorcova, Bessarabia, possessed of a "revolutionary self."[38] In contradistinction to occasional philanthropists, this shows genuine concern for the wretched of the earth, for proletarians and peasants, and puts himself in the service of their liberation, respecting "the iron law of conspiracy," as a result of which he is arrested and put on trial: "His heart was broad and capacious. The whole proletariat could have entered it without squeezing in or otherwise disturbing in the least the tons

---

34   Ibid., 312.
35   Ibid., vol. I, 294; vol. II, 251.
36   Ibid., vol. II, 408.
37   Ibid., vol. II, 437.
38   Gherasim Luca, *Inventatorul iubirii și alte scrieri* ['The Inventor of Love and Other Writings'] (Cluj: Dacia, 2003), 109.

of hatred and passion there."[39] Together with the workers
(a category which also embraces land workers), Fişer is
also fighting for the liberation of nature, which is likewise
"today locked up in an iron house, tortured like our im-
prisoned brethren,"[40] manipulated by the world's rich and
powerful.

Revolution as fractured time

With the installing of the communist regime in Romania,
the representation of the revolution is bureaucratised and
becomes the writer's professional duty, as attested by
almost all the official documents meant to stipulate his
activity. In the 1949 Statute of the Writers' Union of the
Socialist Republic of Romania (the only grouping allowed
in the sphere of literature, organised on a Soviet model),
just like in the tens of documents signed by Gheorghe
Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceauşescu until the fall of
the regime, the very first article stipulates that writers em-
ploy the method of socialist realism, which "calls for the
realist and historically concrete rendering of life seen in
its revolutionary development."[41] Especially in the early
phase of the regime and of socialist realism (1948-1965)
the image of the revolution becomes a literary cliché that
pits against each other the exploiting classes (which need
to disappear in the shortest time) and the exploited, that is,
the impoverished and progressive working class and peas-
antry. According to ideological prescriptions, the heroes
of the revolution were trained in the Soviet Union in the
strategies and procedures that needed to be implemented
at home.

---

39   Ibid., 151.
40   Ibid., 167.
41   *Statutul Uniunii Scriitorilor din Republica Populară
Română*, in *Flacăra* ['The Torch'], II, no. 13 (65), 2 Apr. 1949.

After 1965, with the (tentative) de-politicising of liter-
ature and the granting of some autonomy to it, the image
of the revolution also reaches a new phase and becomes
subject to polemics. In a growing number of prose narra-
tives the figure of the revolutionary and the content of the
revolution are questioned; from accelerated time, revolu-
tion becomes a fractured. From a rare, unique chance for
the collectivity it becomes a mischance for the individ-
ual. This is the case of the second volume of *Moromeţii*
['The Moromete Family,' 1967], the famous novel of
Marin Preda (1922-1980). This text inaugurates a vast and
long-lived narrative phenomenon in socialist Romania,
the prose fiction of the so-called "obsessive decade" (the
1950s, a decade recognised even by the political authori-
ties as authoritarian and dogmatic). In this novel Niculae,
the youngest son of Ilie Moromete, the unforgettable pro-
tagonist of the narrative cycle, is seduced by the discourse
of the village's new, postwar notary and enrols as activ-
ist in the sole political party, returning to his birthplace to
contribute to the setting up of a collective farm. The com-
munist notary speaks to him about a "new religion," cor-
recting himself almost immediately: "But why should we
call it religion, why not call it a revolution? Make a creed
for yourself out of the liberation of man from the weight
of existential struggle and you will see that, by realising
it, you have a new man before you."[42] The entire novel
can be read as a deconstruction of these, initially utopian,
projects, of the revolution and of the new man. Although
at a certain moment Niculae explains to his father that "in-
trigue and ratting on people will never make a new man
out of anyone,"[43] those two behaviour patterns are in fact
dominant even inside the Party and, in time, replace the
promised revolution. Whereas the son is animated by an

---

42   Marin Preda, *Moromeţii*, vol. II, 5th ed. (Bucureşti:
Cartea Românească, 1977), 84, 86.
43   Ibid., 343.

ethos of changing the world in line with revolutionary logic, the father anxiously foresees a world turned upside down and inside out, lacking in cardinal references and values: "When things set out rolling down into the valley, they will not stop until they have reached [the bottom] where there is no more place to roll. What can we stop? Does this world stand firmly on its feet, or can the first madman who puts it into his head to knock it over, indeed knock it over?! This is the question."[44] In other words, the father sees good reason to fear "these raving madmen"[45] with no sense of humour, whom his son's so-called revolution would propel to power.

A similar set of issues is found in a highly influential novel of the period, *Păsările* ['The Birds,' 1970] by Alexandru Ivasiuc (1933-1977). Set in the 1950s, it featured in high school curricula until the fall of the regime. Here the very young engineer Liviu Dunca doesn't believe

---

44   Ibid., 491. This reserved attitude toward the revolution is shared by the writer himself, as he confesses in his autobiographical book *Viaţa ca o pradă* ['Life as a Prey']. During a short stay in Sinaia after his flopped debut as a writer in 1948 he meets Nicolae Moraru, an important ideologue and cultural luminary of the time who, after criticising him for having "missed the essentials" tells him that "the impoverished peasants are becoming more and more a revolutionary force and in this sense the village is indeed destroyed." The young novelist begs to differ: "I have been in the country and I haven't seen any kinds of forces fighting ... Over there the presidents were being changed forever, in this sense there was indeed turmoil in the village, all kinds of former cow herdsmen were given offices, wretches torn off from their erstwhile squalor, who have losta their wee plots of land out of sloth and who, once appointed presidents, showed their true colours, hassling not with the rich and powerful but with the same hard-working people against whom they bore old grudges." *Viaţa ca o pradă,* 2nd ed. (Bucureşti: Cartea Românească, 1979), 184.

45   *Moromeţii*, 177.

the official line about the sabotage that is investigated on the construction site, and for which he is required to testify; eventually he is sentenced to imprisonment for "failure to denounce." He escapes to Bucharest to a convinced, honest communist whom he trusts, to ask for his counsel because, in his opinion, "no innocent people should be destroyed, no innocent blood should be spilt."[46] The communist in question though, who in the meantime has advanced in rank to become Colonel Cherestesiu of the secret police, thinks that individual cases ought not to be considered on the strength of individual criteria, since everything needs to be seen "on a historical scale" and "a revolution is a complicated thing, much more complicated than you could imagine, or as I had imagined it when I was young and started down this path."[47]

Galeria cu viță sălbatică ['The Gazebo with Wild Grapes,' 1976], a novel by Constantin Țoiu (1923-2012) also belongs to the thematic set of the prose of the "obsessive decade." In the novel the young editor Chiril Merișor is ousted from the Party in one of the infamous and gruesome "unmasking assemblies" during "the baby steps of the revolution."[48] When, after 1957, he loses his notebook with private jottings in a banal shop's fitting room, he is arrested and politically condemned one year later. He ends up committing suicide in prison, because he refuses to disclose the identity of A., "the sincerest communist I know." About this, a retired engine fitter and former illegal communist, Chiril had written in his diary: "What is it that A. is asking for? Courage, simplicity, humility, the typical revolutionary virtues. That his superiors should not forget

46   Alexandru Ivasiuc, *Păsările* ['Birds'] (București: Minerva, 1977), 282.

47   Ibid., 281, 284.

48   Constantin Țoiu, *Galeria cu viță sălbatică*, 2nd ed. (București: Eminescu, 1979), 127.

about their class background and that they should not hide behind [empty] phrases."[49]

A consistent representation of the revolution, as well as a forceful and lucid reflection on its remit is found in the novel *Prințul Ghica* ['Prince Ghica,' a historical trilogy published between 1982-1986] by Dana Dumitriu (1943-1987). Although the apparent protagonist is Ion Ghica, who returned to the country after the union of the two Romanian principalities, Wallachia and Moldova, and who is followed in the interval 1858-1866, his youth and the youth of his generation is often evoked, pivoting around the year 1848. Ghica still considers himself the brother of revolutionary leader Nicolae Bălcescu, "the saint of their revolution,"[50] more than of his blood brother Pantazi, and continues to be ridden by a sense of guilt and debt toward his former comrade in arms. In the name of this debt to Bălcescu, but also to his own youth, he considers the actual events, which he largely brings into being himself, to be the progressive outcome of the events of 1848, since "the youth of '48 have grown into mature men by 1858."[51] On the other hand—and hence the sense of guilt—he cannot ignore the degrading image and ideals of his youth, and he is far from alone in doing so: "In their youth they wanted to overthrow the old world and to bring in the new world, but the new one turns out to be infected with the disease of politics."[52] Doubtless because "the Romanian problem is more important than the revolution, the provisional government, democracy, the constitution."[53] But also because the fate of all great events is ultimate decay: "The revolution will be debased through an excess of piousness!

---

49   Ibid., 382.
50   Dana Dumitriu, *Prințul Ghica*, vols. I-III (București: Cartea Românească, 1982-1986), III, 163.
51   Ibid. I, 13.
52   Ibid., III, 93-94.
53   Ibid., I, 138.

And precisely by us, the men of '48! This is the fate of all great, lofty events."[54] On a nocturnal walk the poet Grigore Alexandrescu explains to the prince the various confusions looming large in the public space, among which the fact that the liberals "make so much hullaballoo about their revolutionary ideas that they ended up convincing many that they are the true revolutionaries which is neither true nor to their advantage. With us all turmoil has always ended in some occupation, and the people are repelled by the rebellion-mongers."[55]

A special case is that of Paul Georgescu (1923-1989), a convinced communist writer (a rare phenomenon in socialist Romania), who was extremely influential in the dogmatic criticism of the 1950s, but nevertheless became an advocate of the aesthetic innovations in the new decade. He had a late start as novelist, well past the age of 40, but came to be recognised as the creator of an original fictional universe. He is the author of a retro novel, *Mai mult ca perfectul* ['Pluperfect,' 1984], set in the first decades of the 20th century in Platoneşti, a smalltown in the Bărăgan plains, which aggregates around itself an entire cycle of novels that also includes *Natura lucrurilor* ['The Nature of Things,' 1986] and *Pontice* ['Letters from Pontus,' 1987].[56] It is a deliberately degraded novel of ideas treated in the comic register. It is—a novel of chitchat or of small talk, transparently derived from I. L. Caragiale[57] and with

───────────

54   Ibid., II, 134.

55   Ibid., I, 93.

56   Paul Georgescu, *Mai mult ca perfectul* (București: Eminescu, 1984); *Natura lucrurilor* (București: Eminescu, 1986) ; *Pontice* (București: Cartea Românească, 1987).

57   I. L. Caragiale (1852-1912) is a playwright, prose writer and essayist considered to be one of the founders of modern Romanian literature, a national classic. Like the work of his contemporary, national poet Mihai Eminescu, Caragiale's work, combining classical composition principles with realistic

a wealth of other literary allusions, grafting leftist ideas on a vigorous right-wing vector, and mingling revolution and reaction. The characters are the same, that is, "some doltish intellectuals who sit square on their backside chattering from the gob."[58] Besides the older magistrate Miron Pierețeanu, the novel cycle's protagonists are the younger Matei, Ioan, Marcu and Luca (the lay evangelists of a new world, of social change), the first of whom is a nephew of Pierețeanu's, banned from home precisely for his leftist convictions. These often discuss social matters and sometimes revolution, which the first two in particular understand as the sole chance for progress and change. Although forever discussing the national and social dimension of the revolution (Ioan hails from Transylvania and contemplates the chances of the province's scission from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), they also engage in other, allegorical and allusive dialogues. Thus Ioan opines that "every revolutionary" should be acquainted with "the strategy of the small sticks," because "if you fill the stove with log-wood, you will not manage to light the fire in a hundred years but only choke the room in smoke. — But they burn down fast, too fast. — Once they are lit, it is then you put on the big, mature chunks of wood."[59] Luca and Marcu also discuss the age of the participants to the revolution more explicitly: "[Luca:] Marcu, how do you explain it though that so many youth take part in the revolution and even sacrifice themselves for it ... They have all their life ahead of them, the others have far less to lose... And still... In a war it's different, all the men who know how to

---

character rendition, is still to this day very fresh and influential. Eugène Ionesco writes in a portrait dedicated to him in *Notes et contre-notes* ('Notes and Counter-notes,' 1962) that Caragiale is "the greatest of the unknown playwrights": Eugène Ionesco, *Note și contranote* (București: Humanitas, 1992), 153.

58   *Mai mult ca perfectul*, 235-236.
59   Ibid., 136.

handle weapons are drafted, and that's it. But only those who want will join the revolution. If you so prefer, you can sit cosily at home and play backgammon. [Marcu:] I haven't thought about that. Perhaps because you have your future ahead of you and want to change it. Perhaps because you don't have the responsibility of a family, especially of children, But the heart too beats differently, it throbs with different vigour."[60]

Not long afterwards, in 1989, other youth would rally on the streets, heeding no danger, and they would start a new revolution. In the many years that followed (we are still living with this obsession) Romanians would tentatively question their Romanianness, sleepwalking with their shirts over their coats and asking themselves, full of loathing: Who are we? One thing is certain though: after 1990, Romanians no longer want to make modernism, although they are still willing to modernise their country, including its literature. Another history is about to take flight, both in the social and artistic sense.

---

60   Ibid., 163-164.

Part V

Afterlives of Modernism vs. Its Liquidation after WWII

Gábor Schein

AUSCHWITZ: WRITING, LIFE AND LITERATURE IN THREE NOVELS BY IMRE KERTÉSZ

Imre Kertész' novels, *Fatelessness* (1975), *Fiasco* (1988), *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (1990) and *Liquidation* (2003) are part of a single writerly project.[1] According to the motivation of the Nobel Committee that awarded him the prize in 2002, this project examines whether it is still possible—and if so, how—to live and think as individuals in the state of functional subjection into which the two great totalitarian regimes have forced the human being. Kertész perspicuously links the two aspects of subjection, totalitarianism as bodily and as linguistic event: that is, he examines totalitarianism not as a political but as an aesthetic reality that transcends the political. Therefore, in his works writing is constantly forced to reflect on the linguistic relation between the writing of novels and diaries on the one hand, and totalitarianism on the other hand. This very reflexiveness becomes the foundational event of his work. The protagonists of three of his novels are writers; in two, *Fiasco* and *Liquidation*, the plot itself revolves around literary texts, whereas in *Kaddish* a narrative acquires particular importance in the relationship between

---

1   All references, unless otherwise specified, are to the following English editions: Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*, translated by Tim Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 2004), e-book; Imre Kertész, *Fiasco*, translated by Tim Wilkinson (New York: Melville House, 2011), e-book; Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, translated by Tim Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 2004), e-book; Imre Kertész, *Liquidation*, translated by Tim Wilkinson (London: Vintage, 2004).

husband and wife. These three novels may be considered continuations and thorough probings of the viability of the 19th-20th century Künstlerroman. This circumstance alone is enough to express how deeply Kertész's writerly project is rooted in the traditional interpretive frameworks of modernism, from whose most important representatives he looked to Thomas Mann, Kafka and Camus as models for self-reflection.

Together with Kertész's works written in a diary form, and whose fulcrum is the theme of writing, the novels mentioned above form intricate contextual and signifying networks. Kertész's readers become acquainted not with this or that part of the oeuvre, but emphatically with networks enmeshed with these intricate intertextual relations, repetitions, transpositions, and rewritings, and it is only by interpreting such networks that they can establish a relation with the whole.

"My ethics, to write and live the selfsame novel, is at any rate unchanged. *Fiasco*, too, originates from the same territory as *Fatelessness*, and even if it apparently took a different side alley, the attentive gaze will no doubt recognise the point where the two are seen to merge," we can read in the author's blurb to the first edition of *Fiasco*.[2] This short commentary does not merely draw attention to the network-like nature of the oeuvre, but it also contains poignant elements of the chain of signifiers whose internal connections I would like to explore here: writing, life, work, existence, and writerly ethics. In interpreting the relation between writing and life prevalent in Kertész's texts, the modes of reading layered around the autobiographical pact are of no use whatsoever.

In Kertész's case one cannot set up a metonymic—hierarchical or chronological—relation between life and

---

2   Kertész Imre, *Kudarc* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1988).

writing. To the readers, writing appears as the sole possible mode of life, at once released into, and liquidated in writing, and as such it undoubtedly renews, under radically different conditions, an ethos first announced in early German Romanticism. This condition of writing expresses the profound embeddedness of Kertész's art in the period of literary modernity. The network of his fictional texts and diaries continuously and extensively reflects on the mode of existence of writing, on the practice of writing, and on the pitfalls of writerly identifications, as well as on the reception of his written works. Vivian Liska captures the essence of this modernist outlook in the way in which such questions of self-reflexivity have fed into fiction itself, making the boundaries of literature become forever elusive.[3] The reason why Kertész has no biography in the public sphere, but only a history of his work, is that from the start, and throughout his career, he consistently rejected all identity patterns that he had not himself created through writing, as inseparable from it: that is, any versions of identity imposed on him by biographical accident or external categories and judgements. Never had this striving on his part become more manifest than at the moment when his name became the object of widespread racial, ethnicist labelling after receiving the Nobel—especially since Kertész was the first and, to this date, the only Hungarian-language writer to have been awarded that prize. This event delivered a powerful shock to Hungarian society, in successive waves. One of the reasons was Kertész's relative obscurity in Hungary before the award. Never before had Hungarian literature been faced with such a radical divergence of international and national assessments of value. More importantly, however, Kertész's person and prose are inseparable from the wound that the

---

3   Vivian Liska, "Kafka, Modernism and Literary Theory," in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 76.

systematic extermination of 600,000 Hungarian citizens labelled Jews inflicted on Hungarian society's self-image, and on the day-to-day life of every single settlement in the country. The traumas of the victims and perpetrators were inherited by the next generation without any forms of social discourse and memory being permitted to emerge in order to mitigate their isolating effect. No substantial such change occurred after 1989, either. On the contrary, the situation became even more difficult with the violent flaring up of anti-Semitic discourse in public life, which the subcultures of the Hungarian political right use, to this day, as a crucial component of their identity, and whose legacy the country's righwing governments have constantly treated pragmatically, rather than on grounds of principle. Anti-Semitic tropes and discourses continue to be harnessed in order to project internal or external enemies, so vital to the strengthening of the electorate's sense of a common identity. 2002 was one time when a cluster of voices erupted in Hungarian public life, symbolically excluding Kertész from the nation (always defined in ethnic terms).[4] Kertész's writerly figure, life and work continued

---

4   Kornél Döbrentei, an influential rightwing writer made the following statement on Hungarian National Television after the announcement of Kertész's Nobel: "It is awful when somebody (...) achieves this prominent literary award by non-explicitly suggesting the guilt of a nation," adding: "It is no secret that we live under a taste terror wielded by a minority, to whom that gentleman belongs." In the same program he repeatedly called the writer "Imre Kertész," that is, in reverse order from Hungarian use which fronts the family name, as a none too veiled allusion to the writer's foreignness and racial non-belonging. On 11 January 2004, Döbrentei made a speech in front of a Budapest radio headquarters that recalled the darkest days of Hungarian political anti-Semitism; in protest to this speech and the Hungarian Writers' Union's complicit silence, 127 writers resigned from the Union, following the example of Kertész, who had left earlier, for similar reasons.

to be fashioned into monuments for public use, in line with uncontrollable mediatic, cultural and political needs.[5] Unfortunately he himself helped facilitate such exploitations towards the end of his life, when on 20 August 2014, he accepted Hungary's Order of St. Stephen.[6] His unforgettable and mercilessly analytic earlier statements about being a Holocaust clown,[7] or about resisting, even retrospectively, every attempt to pigeonhole him as "Hungarian" or "Jewish,"[8] nevertheless leave no doubt about his intention to stick to his self-identifications, always articulated with mordant self-irony, by means of the repetitions, mirrorings and transpositions of writing. As far as (self-)identification goes, Kertész's demise inaugurated a radically new stage in the Hungarian cultural-political sphere. Its symbolic point

---

5   William L. Howarth, "Some Principles of Autobiography," in *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical,* edited by James Olney (Princeton: New Jersey, 1980), 92.

6   The Order of St. Stephen became the highest state award in Hungary in 2011 under PM Viktor Orbán; its predecessor, the Royal Hungarian Order of St. Stephen, was created by regent Miklós Horthy in 1938 and, by 1944, it counted Hermann Göring, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Galeazzo Ciano among its recipients.

7   Kertész Imre, Iris Radisch, "Ich war ein Holocaust-Clown," *Die Zeit,* 2 September 2013 (38), https://www.zeit.de/2013/38/imre-kertesz-bilanz.

8   „Ich bin ein Produkt der europäischen Kultur, ein Décadent, wenn Sie so wollen, ein Entwurzelter, stempeln Sie mich nicht zum Ungarn. Es reicht, dass Ihre Landsleute mich zum Juden gemacht haben. Rassische, nationale Zugehörigkeiten gelten nicht für mich." Kertész Imre, „In Ungarn haben die Antisemiten das Sagen" [I am a product of European culture, a decadent or, if you will, rootless; don't label me Hungarian. It's more than enough that your countrymen have made me into a Jew. For me racial, national belonging will not do.] *Die Welt,* 2009. 11. 05. https://www.welt.de/kultur/article5098828/In-Ungarn-haben-Antisemiten-das-Sagen.html

of origin, in the author's lifetime, was the awarding of the Order of St. Stephen. Today Kertész's oeuvre is subject to ideological appropriation, attempts against which he can no longer react, while his readers are rightfully troubled by the massive biopolitical outlashing of his late essays, speeches and statements, incompatible with the defining part of Kertész's text-world.

However, the vanishing point of writing can be nothing but the invisible—or, to quote Kertész, secret—life. Although the Kertész project, complemented by the diaries written beginning with the early 1960s, unmistakably brings self-archiving procedures into play, his diaries are seamlessly and organically integrated into a network of self-quotations and rephrasings, and of repeated motifs; this precludes any strict demarcation from the group of texts deemed more fictional on generic grounds. Within the diaries themselves, the network of signifiers excludes readings that would recognise life within the realm of objecthood and imagination, as if independent of, or transcending, the intertextual figuration of writing. That is why writing can be the answer to all questions for the "old boy," the writer figure of *Fiasco*, and that is why his note-taking is not finished where it ends. It must go on, crossing over to another level of fictionality, into the novel he has authored: "Just don't finish, since nothing ever comes to an end: I have to continue, carry on writing, yes, confidentially and with sickening talkativeness, like two killers chatting."[9]

This interminable coming-into-being of the network of texts can be well studied even within a single work, *Fiasco*. Its writer-figure, whom we encounter in the first half of the novel, creates his own alter-ego in Köves (the protagonist, who bears the same name as the first-person narrator of *Fatelessness*), and another alter-ego in the

---

9   Kertész, *Fiasco*.

figure of Berg, while he ironically shares some elements of his own life-relations with both. The point is not that the old boy may turn himself, for want of a better subject matter, into the object of representation, obeying the external obligation to write, although the narrative built around him includes a few details that might appear to sanction this explanation. There are other aspects that make it clear that by repeating his own story with a difference, with a series of shifts and retractions, he explores whether he might have reached different decisions than the ones he actually made: if he could have avoided becoming a writer, if he had been able to vanish without a trace in time—in other words, if, at any point in time, he could have avoided his fate, could then perhaps the process of self-liquidation have culminated in self-creation, which he can now only experience as shame, ridicule,[10] or fiasco?[11] A few sentences in the book weigh heavy in light of the later pieces of Kertész's oeuvre. There is, for instance, a remark by Mrs. Weigand that anticipates the main theme of *Kaddish*: "What perpetual pangs of guilt it causes: bringing a child into the world!... One never gets over it! And into a world like this, of all places..."[12] Similarly, the question the old boy asks after reflecting onthe responsive nature of novel-writing

---

10   Kertész, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*.

11   In *Dossier K*, Kertész interprets the foundational conceit of *Fiasco* as follows: "the novel is based on an ultimately comic idea. In the intellectual vacuity of the seventies, the so-called Brezhnev era, a writer realizes that he is working against himself because the age he lives in is incompatible with creative life. Thus, he sets out to write a novel which is nothing else but the process of reiterating fate: he re-creates, step by step, the life-situations of his youthful alter ego, Köves, forever on the lookout for the decisive error, the point from where it became impossible for him to vanish, submerge in the anonymous mash of history." *K. dosszié* (Budapest: Magvető, 2006), 154.

12   Kertész, *Fiasco*.

(to whom is his own writing addressed, "if, as we all know, God is dead,"[13]) alludes proleptically to *Kaddish*, but at the same time also to the status of the whole textual universe "To nothingness, to my unknown fellow human beings, to the world. It did not turn out as a prayer but as a novel,"[14] comes the answer, making it clear that it would be erroneous to link the text of the next novel, *Kaddish*, to the text of the Jewish funeral prayer, especially since they are not in any way textually related.[15] The subsequent novel emerges in the emptied space of the prayer, rendered unsayable due to the death of the novel's addressee. The text's rhetorical form, the infinitised explanation that encompasses changing perspectives, subsumes the experience of absence, of gaps of the empty space, of its simultaneously liberating and compelling force.

One could go on listing such motifs at length. The network-like relations pointing proleptically and analeptically in time make it obvious that, although there are differences in aesthetic quality between the individual books, it is wrong to read the Kertész oeuvre as a narrative of Bildung or, on the contrary, of decadence, as Sándor Radnóti has repeatedly suggested.[16] It is more adequate and productive to consider the whole corpus as a con-temporaneous whole.

But let us for now stay with *Fiasco*, the novel with the most complex structure of all of Kertész's works. One

---

13   Ibid.

14   Ibid.

15   "The, one might say, perfect overlapping of the novel form and of the life form, the novel as prayer, as the discussion opened, in fact solicited ('prayer') with well-shaped sentences, of infinite exactitude, is *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*." Visky András, *A különbözőség vidékén* (Budapest: Vigília, 2007), 67.

16   Cf. Sándor Radnóti, "Auschwitz betege" ['The patient of Auschwitz'], in *Műhelymunka* ['From the Workshop'] (Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 2004), 98.

can easily see that the old boy is not the narrator of his own story, which is in fact recounted by an ironic voice independent from him, one which continuously comments on itself in parenthetical asides, bringing endless specifications and spreading doubt upon itself. In other words, the novel performs a double metalepsis. The situation is more complex yet: in the novel it is not Kertész but the old boy who is identified as the author of *Fatelessness*. Or, more specifically: the reader cannot be certain that the novel submitted by the old boy to a publisher is identical with Kertész's *Fatelessness*, but we can be certain that the reader's review that rejected the novel is identical. At the same time those familiar with Kertész's work know that the text Berg reads as part of a novel-in-progress titled *I, the Executioner*, and which according to Köves lacks precisely what is *not* necessary—that is, life—is a short fragment of an eponymous novel by Kertész, similarly aborted and preserved in manuscript form in the writer's archive.[17]

These metaleptic procedures open up two avenues for interpretation. According to one, Kertész's acts of fictionalisation ultimately annihilate fiction itself, and in the end, for him the novel serves the purpose of continuously mirroring his own life-story and endowing it with a narrative plotline. For this reading we should possess an intimate knowledge of the author's extratextual, factual life, in case one can speak of factuality at all in this connection. However, this is not and cannot be valid, for if writing is carried out under the skies of Auschwitz, it is perpetually forced to face the limitations and effacement of the modern daydream of one's "own" life and death. Kertész's life is identical with his writing; the reader experiences here a circularity that engulfs the texts' authorship and origin, that is, the mere idea of exteriority. Contrary to the intentions

---

17   Kertész has addressed this issue publicly: see *K. dosszié* ['Dossier K'], 171.

dictated by the genre, Clara Royer's Kertész monograph,[18] initially written for a French readership and recently published in Hungarian, forcefully demonstrates this point: according to its subtitle, it is a biographical essay, but in its form it retraces the trajectory of the novelist's thinking and writing—it is a repetition and a variation. In the monograph the biographical scaffolding is supplanted by the framework of the text-world's emergence, and everything that Royer says about the so-called life history is nothing but a restructured applying of the reading of events familiar from the diaries and novels to the author's person. That's why the interpretation can uncover the dialectical relationship between life and writing. The memories, inaccessible in themselves and systematically abolished, are preserved in writing through their very eradication. In this way they become impersonal and interchangeable, thus allowing mirrorings and transpositions—fictionalising acts—to be carried out, as we can read in the old boy's notes in *Fiasco*:

> I suppose I never truly believed in my own existence. As I have already hinted earlier, I had good, sound, one might say objective, reasons for that. When I was writing my novel, this deficiency paid remarkable dividends as it became practically a work tool for me; it was worn down in the course of my daily activity, and when it had tired of my converting it into words, it did not bother me further.[19]

It is hardly a coincidence that the old boy is commissioned to translate Rilke's oft-quoted *Letters to a Young Poet*. Echoes from Rilke's text abound on the pages of *Kaddish,* too. From our perspective it is important to

18   Clara Royer, *Imre Kertész: 'L'histoire de mes morts'*—*essai biographique* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2017).
19   Kertész, *Fiasco*.

observe that in the very first letter Rilke reprimands Mr Kappus because his verses "have no identity of their own, though they do have tacit and concealed hints of something personal."[20] What is also made obvious is that writing must emerge from the profoundest deathly drives of our personality, from the depth where everything is crystallised into a law. It is well known that for Rilke, the reciprocal moulding and interaction of life and writing is the key to the well-nigh anachronistic achievement of fulfilled artistic life.[21] The creator's life lived in this way is the guarantee of what Rilke would detail to Mr Kappus in the eighth letter: the necessity that "nothing alien should happen to us, but only what has long been part of us." And here the key concept follows, which was to become the vanishing point of a lifelong work in Kertész's case—a vortex that shows no signs of appeasement in the Hungarian cultural and political space even after the author's death:

> ...we shall gradually learn to recognize that what we call fate originates in ourselves, in humankind, and does not work on us from the outside. Only because so many people did not absorb their fates while they were inhabited by them, and did not make them a part of themselves, only because of this did they fail to recognize what emerged from them. It was so foreign to them that in their confused panic they assumed it must just have entered into them, for they swore never to have found anything of the sort in themselves before.[22]

---

20   Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet.* translated by Charlie Louth, with an Introduction by Lewis Hyde (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), e-book.

21   Cf. Péter Por, *Die orphische Figur* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1997), 113.

22   Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet.*

With Rilke, the concept of organic fate is thorough-
ly imbricated with the creative act and with the cardinal
questions of his own poetics. According to Georg Simmel,
who was the first to recognise the nature of the poetic turn
witnessed in Rilke and Stefan George, in the course of the
artwork's creation or reception feeling has to go beyond
the "merely-personal" and has to give voice to that layer
of the self which does not merely mirror "supra-personal
necessities," but is also part of the order that transcends
the individual self.[23] According to Kertész's mindframe,
too, the creator must absorb the accidentals of life, s/he has
to transform them and be able to peel off what originates
in him/her from that which is accumulated from without.
Fate—or writing that supplants existence—can solely
originate from the former. Thus, in Kertész's case it is not
enough to remark that the mutations in (self-)identification
and writing point in the same direction: there is more to it
than that. Namely, that (self-)identification stems exclu-
sively from writing. This also means that writing is neces-
sarily the work of liquidating life, and brings on its corol-
lary, the atrophying of sentiment.[24] Writing is a continuous
invitation of death. Its result will be, however, the exact
opposite of liquidation: creation, the birth of literature.
As the old boy, author of *Fatelessness*, asks in one of his

---

23   Georg Simmel, *Eine kunstphilosophische Betrachtung*
(1898), in *Vom Wesen der Moderne,* edited by Werner Jung
(Berlin: Junius Verlag, 1898), 180.

24   "Because this too is just a hoe's scratch towards the
trench, the burial pit that I am digging in the air (because there
I shall be able to lie down in comfort), and perhaps that is why,
as I say (though I don't say it to the philosopher, just to myself),
there is no need to fear emotional sclerosis, one should accept
it, if not positively welcome it, like a helping hand extended to-
wards us which, for all that it is undoubtedly helping us towards
the trench, is still helping nonetheless." Kertész, *Kaddish for an
Unborn Child*.

marginalia, "How could it be that those sentences for me contained merely imaginary events, an imaginary cattle truck, an imaginary Auschwitz, and an imaginary four-teen-and-a-half-year-old boy, even though I myself had at one time been that fourteen-and-a-half-year-old boy?"[25]

If earlier I started from Kertész's quotations of Rilke and Rilke's poetic practice, at this juncture we arrive at a problem that is ab-originally Kafkaesque. This is pow-erfully inscribed in recent Hungarian literature by writers like Kertész and Szilárd Borbély.[26] I think we have to take the prayer closing *Kaddish* seriously, in at least two re-spects. The dark vortex in which life is submerged before our very eyes is none other than the stream of textuality. Refusing to be submerged, this stream of textuality be-comes literature, an integral part of and fuel for the liter-ary establishment, whose very existence spreads shame. And this shame, as we know, survives K: before long, the canons emerge in their full glory. My point here is that in Kertész's case, questions of poetics quickly lead to ques-tions of fate and fatelessness, and to questions of (self-)identification, which—like nearly all serious questions re-lated to writing—exceed the horizons of literary history, while nevertheless belonging to literature, for it is, after

---

25   Kertész, *Fiasco*.

26   Szilárd Borbély (1963-2014) is considered one of the most important authors of post-1989 Hungarian literature who worked in poetry and fiction as well as in theatre. He had an immense impact on the transformation of Hungarian poetry in the last two decades, strongly influencing the conceptualisation of poetry's social role and its linguistic-thematic possibilities, his writing being closely associated with the ethical turn. His best-known work is *The Dispossessed: A novel* (translated by Ottilie Mulzet, Harper Perennial, 2016). Of the volumes of his poetry translated into English by Ottilie Mulzet, the most repre-sentative is *Final Matters: Selected Poems* (The Lockert Library of Poetry, 2019).

all, literature towards which his writing gravitates, sharing the common, canonical destiny of the mountain made up of millions of books:

> There is no getting away from it, he had written a novel, but only in the sense that he would have flung himself out of even an aircraft into nothingness in the event of a terminal disaster, if he saw that as the sole possibility of survival; all at once it became obvious to Köves that, figuratively speaking, he could now only hit the ground as a writer or vanish into nothingness. [...] What did one book signify, bearing in mind that at least one million book titles were published annually across the face of the globe, if not more? What could a reader's fleeting emotion signify (in his mind, Köves saw the deeply stirred reader as, in search of a fresh stirred feeling, he was already stretching out a hand absent-mindedly to the shelf for a new book) as compared with the years that he, Köves, had dedicated to his task as he ruined his life, drained himself, and tortured his wife?[27]

I would like to point out that the resolution of this problem within the literary system, or rather, at its limit, is only possible in a Kafkaesque mode. Not with the author's death, but with the burning of the manuscript. Of course, retrospectively the burning of the manuscript became an allusion to the burning of books and bodies. But while in Kafka's case—that is, in reality—Max Brod felicitously refused to burn the papers, initiating thus the tumultuous afterlife of Kafka's manuscripts, the novel written by *Liquidation*'s B is burned by B's former wife, while Kertész himself sold the rights to his papers to a Berlin archive built with the utmost professionalism. That is, he gave over his work, including his diaries and letters, to

---

27   Kertész, *Fiasco.*

the literary establishment. Kertész's thinking and writing forcefully provoked and even subverted this institutional system, but his radicalism was curbed precisely at the moment when death, constantly invited by writing, emerged on the horizon in its concreteness as event. As a result of this perspective, Kertész—luckily for his readers—carefully cemented himself back into the literary establishment, allowing himself the not insignificant option to entrust the rights to his manuscripts to the Berlin Akademie der Künste rather than to the equivalent Hungarian literary institutions.

Despite the writing's literary gravitational force, we cannot gloss over the fact that (self-)identification is also a political question. It is also a question of the philosophy of history and of the politics of memory, since the long shadow of Auschwitz falls on it. The double helix of writing is released, on the one hand, into the liquidation of life, and on the other hand, into assumed shame, the order of quotations and, ultimately, into literary apotheosis. In an ethical sense we can speak of obligation and decision at the same time. The important question here is the nature of this decision. The answers to it are inscribed in the history of Kertész's Hungarian reception, and they in turn influenced not just the way in which Kertész perceived his relationship with his surroundings but also how he saw his own place in Hungarian literature.

The silence of Ernő Kulcsár Szabó's literary history[28] can be assessed well from its chapter on poet János Pilinszky.[29] Kulcsár Szabó's literary history speaks of

---

28   Ernő Kulcsár Szabó (b. 1950), professor of Budapest's Lóránd Eötvös University, was the first to introduce the study of reception aesthetic and reader-response theory in Hungarian academia. Between 1996 and 2005 he was head of department at Humboldt University, Berlin.

29   János Pilinszky (1921-1981) was one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the 20th century. He is best remembered for

Harmadnapon [*On the Third Day,* 1957], about the poem's Christian symbolism and the ontological insight embedded in the awareness of absence, as if it were a matter of abstract discourse, a language-philosophical problem, and not a complex and intricate literary response which radically provokes and corrodes the limits of literary self-reflection—in other words, as if the whole thing had nothing to do with the Holocaust or, in Celan's incisive phrasing, with "the thousand darknesses of murderous speech"[30] that language underwent, without having words for it. The symbolic value of Auschwitz, the memory of the liquidation of European Jews, the name of the concentration camps which appear in Pilinszky's poetry (Ravensbrück, Harbach) get no mention; Kulcsár-Szabó's interpretation does not depart from the conceptual framework of Heideggerian ontology. This species of silencing and neutralising cannot encounter the experience of the ethical corrosion of language and of the so-called literariness that

his poems of the 1950s which bear witness to the horrors of the Second World War and mid-twentieth century Europe. His language has a remarkable link to the poetry of the great European modernists of the 1950s and '60s, such as Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann and René Char. Two selections of his work have appeared in English: *Selected Poems*, translated by Ted Hughes and János Csokits (Carcanet, 1976)—later expanded into *The Desert of Love* (Anvil, 1989)—and *Crater*, translated by Peter Jay (Anvil, 1978).

30   "In spite of everything, [language] remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all." Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," in *Collected Prose*, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 33-36: 34.

we mostly associate with Celan, just as Heidegger's post-war philosophy dodged the issue. In this reading Kertész's presence remains a silent event. Let me add that this silence, the vanishing traces, their occultation, the impossibility of testimony constitutes Kertész's very writerly material.

The other strategy of elusion, incomparably more complicated, is linked to the criticism of Sándor Radnóti.[31] For a long time Radnóti was wary of writing about Kertész, but this reticence became untenable. He published two substantial reviews on *Kaddish* and *Liquidation*, voicing his reservations about both novels. Radnóti confronts both books with the foundational concepts of a humanist tradition understood in the Gadamerian sense, the first of which is the concept of work. He observes that in *Kaddish* "'work' in the usual sense of the word […] has no purpose, no finality that would lead back to 'life' and get established there, as in success or, in a more authentic sense, the sense or meaning of work. Work runs counter to life, its precondition is the destruction of human relationships, and it is ultimately nothing else but the protracted delivery of a death sentence."[32] The problem Radnóti faces here is the same I am tackling, but his review lets precious little of the dialectical vortex around writing and (self-)identification to come into view. What his title already makes

---

31   Sándor Radnóti (b. 1946), an aesthete and philosopher of art connected to the circle of Lukács's disciples, Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, was a member of the liberal opposition of the Kádár regime, who could therefore not be employed between 1980 and 1989. After 1989 he became editor of the prestigious literary magazine *Holmi*; at present, he is Professor at the Institute of Aesthetics and Art Theory of Lóránd Eötvös University, Budapest.

32   Sándor Radnóti, "Auschwitz mint szellemi *életforma*" ['Auschwitz as intellectual mode of life'], in *Műhelymunka* ['From the Workshop'] (Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 2004), 87.

explicit is, on the other hand, that everything he addresses is inseparable from the memory of the Holocaust, from the question whether its memory can serve as the foundation of any intellectual mode of existence. But he doesn't engage seriously with the latter possibility; at this juncture a pathologising discourse takes over both reviews. He declares the disruption of work and of life's continuity to be a pathological disposition and remarks with some rancour that "a psychoanalyst could sample a whole catalogue's worth of neurotic symptoms" from the book.[33] There is undoubtedly a form of psychology that tackles the neuroses of victims, perpetrators and passive witnesses, but this ushering of possible readings into the domain of psychoanalysis and therapy drastically delimits the play of reading in the Gadamerian sense. Radnóti's critique proceeds to sum up the work's fundamental nature in this very idea of insanity, so in the end the work would be no more than "the sketching of personal and historical pathology."[34]

After Foucault it is hardly necessary to elaborate what kind of rhetoric of exclusion routinely proceeds to pathologise such modes of thinking and memory that crack and corrode the humanistic tradition and the bourgeois lifeworld. Radnóti sticks, with respectable consistency, to reading *Fatelessness* as a Bildungsroman and he regards the protagonist, Gyuri Köves as a camp apprentice. This leads, in the case of *Kaddish*, first to his inevitable detection of a moral hierarchy between husband and wife (obviously in favour of the latter, and obviously proceeding as if it followed from the representation itself),[35] then to the critic himself stepping into the novel's space to act as the wife's defence attorney, intellectually of the same standing as the narrator-protagonist: "We needn't go to the lengths

---

33   Ibid.
34   Ibid., 92.
35   "Kertész renders the wife's figure as morally superior to the protagonist," ibid.

of engaging in theoretical battles with the protagonist (and expose our conviction that history is not predetermined, and that the many steps leading to Auschwitz can be rationalised, while Auschwitz itself cannot) to realise: there is some philosophical inconsistency and practical pathological haughtiness in someone reserving for himself alone the right to tear apart the network of rationalism, to abandon social life and step out, alone, into freedom, into nothingness. The wife is right to affirm that this is no freedom but merely perpetual violence and perpetual flight."[36] From a gendered perspective Kertész's work is indeed severely asymmetrical since, while the writer-husband's whole discourse delineates itself in opposition to the law of the father, that is, to the Oedipal relationship to history, it cannot ever leave the realm of that discourse, in so far as the wife is only allowed to appear in it as the silent addressee, without a story of her own to tell for the most part, and she does not participate in the refusal to have children. But this is not Radnóti's line of argument, and against his argument the question that begs asking is if it is at all possible to step out into freedom in any other way than utterly alone.

In writing about *Liquidation,* already in the title Radnóti speaks about illness instead of intellectual behaviour. What he reads is a thesis novel: "With eyes fixed on Auschwitz one can only live in a dictatorship, but because one cannot avert one's eye from Auschwitz, for the clear-sighted living in freedom who want to decode Auschwitz, who 'want to catch out Auschwitz in their own life, in their own day-to-day life, such as they lived it,' to live is impossible."[37] I think this is a possible and valid reading of *Liquidation*, although Radnóti does little more than appropriate the motivation of suicide from the protagonist's farewell letter

---

36   Ibid*.,* 95.

37   Sándor Radnóti, "Auschwitz betege" ['The patient of Auschwitz'], in *Műhelymunka,* 99.

to Sára, something that is later reinforced by Judit, Bee's former wife,[38] although she merely voices her opinion: "The pretext for my existence has ceased; the existential condition of surviving has ceased. I ought now to live like an adult, like a man. But I have no inclination for that, no inclination to step out of prison into infinite space to watch the dwindling and evaporation of my superfluous… Surely I wasn't about to say 'tragedy'! How ridiculous."[39] That is, Radnóti accepts Bee's explanation and equates it with the novel's thesis. In this interpretation, the obligation to step out is produced as the result of an external event, the regime change. But in the novel an internal motivation is also given: namely, the fact that Bee had completed his novel, the only novel to write that was given to him. And, in contrast to the old boy of *Fiasco*, Bee doesn't wish to become a writer. Furthermore, we know that before his suicide he had asked Judit to burn the frame of his intellectual mode of existence, the manuscript of his only novel, and Judit fulfilled his wish.[40]

---

38   "'He was burnt out,' she said after some deliberation, softly and, so it struck me, with deep feeling. 'The resistance was gone; the whole world had opened up before his eyes. And by them he was fed up with having to seek out new prisons for himself.' Yes, that sounded right. I asked her whether she had met or spoken with Bee immediately before his death. Neither, she said." Kertész, *Liquidation,* 96.

39   Ibid., 77-78.

40   Before burning the manuscript, Judit read it and later summed up to Bee what she had read: "The struggle of a man and a woman. They love each other to start with, but later on the woman wants a child from the man, and he is unable to forgive the woman for that. He subjects the woman to various miseries in order to break and undermine her faith in the world. He drives her into a severe psychological crisis, to the verge of suicide, and when he realizes this, he himself commits suicide instead of the woman, (Kertész, *Liquidation,* 106). Quite obviously,

Silencing and pathologising carried out in the name of humanist normativity are complementary procedures which powerfully imprinted the discourse of the Holocaust in Germany in the early 1960s. This discourse system of elusion stems in our case from the desire for preserving the apparent integrity and canonising power of literary history and literary criticism in the face of the irruption of the experience of the Holocaust. Starting with Adorno, this experience cracks open, with unprecedentedly strong and obstinate ethical provocation, the whole inherited system of literary representations, and at the same time it challenges with at least as strong and obstinate ethical provocation the ethos of reading for a moral lesson, the assumption of the historical, evolutionary narrativisation of literature, and the procedures of canonisation. Adorno's all too often and routinely misquoted statement—that with ill-prepared critical intelligence it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, otherwise even the insight of why it has become impossible to write poetry today is corroded—primarily states the impossible-to-elude experience of rupture in relation to literature's chances after Auschwitz:

> Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.[41]

Bee's manuscript is another version of the problem presented in *Kaddish*; no relationship to the regime change can be traced.

41   Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, translated by Samuel & Shierry Weber, 2nd ed. (MIT Press, 1983), 17-34: 33.

It is in the wake of this experience that Teri Szűcs raises the question, "Can we possibly bring into being the history of rupture, can we turn it into a linguistic experience? Can our narratives resist the discursive power that weaves the network of narratives along the lines of comparison, weighing, cause-and-effect relationships?"[42]

I think that Kertész's reception in Hungary faces a two-fold task. Not only does it need to come to terms, in an authentic way—entering dialogue with the continuously growing international reception—with Kertész' text-world, but it also needs to create the preconditions for this: that is, it needs to seize seriously the nature of the narrative networks of its own weaving.

I would like to make one further detour regarding the problem of dictatorship and the gaze fixed on the Holocaust. I think that in order to understand this relationship we have to bear in mind the fact that Kertész's work confronted quite early on the almost instantaneous transformation of the Holocaust into a metaphor in language,[43] just as it addressed the fact that at the same speed, the traces of the camps, of the whole logistics of Nazism started vanishing from the map; in other words,

---

42   Szűcs Teri, *A felejtés története* ['The history of oblivion'] (Budapest-Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011), 111.

43   "The problem is whether the Holocaust can be included into comparisons figures to present other genocides of the European and Non-European history. It is clear that to be unprecedented is not the same thing as to be unique, although the two concepts often occur in the same contexts when referring to the Holocaust. It is also clear that there may be 'stakes' in insisting on either or both. But it is difficult, these days, to find someone who objects on principle to any and all comparisons of the Holocaust with other events or phenomena on the grounds that they necessarily falsify history and/or demean the suffering of those who experienced the Holocaust." Mark J. Webber, "Metaphorising the Holocaust: The Ethics of Comparisons," *Images*, VIII/15-16 (2011): 6.

confronting the fact that almost immediately after the act Europe started giving over the material, object references of narratives about Auschwitz to sophisticated forms of forgetting and none too sophisticated forms of annihilation. Beside Kertész, the other writer in Hungary to recognise this process from an early date was poet János Pilinszky, when he wrote in *Ars poetica helyett* [Instead of an ars poetica]: "Today Auschwitz is a museum."[44] In my reading Kertész's book does not state that with one's gaze fixed on Auschwitz one can only live on in a dictatorship, for this would be belied, among so many other trajectories, by the biography of Celan himself who had, after all, lived for 25 years in Vienna and Paris. Neither does it state that unfortunately the survivors cannot live with their gaze not fixed on Auschwitz, something we must grant them, as this is their trauma—for this would be inane. I don't believe the book lends itself to allegorisation in this or any other manner. What Kertész indeed states in his essays, however, is that one cannot live with one's gaze not fixed on Auschwitz, irrespective of one's date of birth. Neither is this an outcome of the impossibility to heal trauma, but a consequence of an intellectual mode of existence: because after Auschwitz, culture could only originate in Auschwitz.[45] The gaze fixed on it is not directed at the

---

44   János Pilinszky discussed the centrality of the Holocaust to his vision in an essay entitled "Instead of an ars poetica": "Today, Auschwitz is a museum. Within its walls, the past—and in a certain sense, the past that belongs to every one of us—is here present with that infinitive weight and that plainness that is all times reality's innermost virtue; and for its doors having been closed, it has become more real, more valid still… All that happened here is a scandal insofar as it could happen, and sacred without exception insofar as it did happen."

45   "The Holocaust is a value, because through immeasurable sufferings it has led to immeasurable knowledge, and thereby contains immeasurable moral reserves." Imre Kertész,

past, but sharply at the present. I see it as emphatic that Kertész breaks with the discourse which places at its centre the requirement, impossible to define, of "processing, or working off the past" [*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*]. This requirement is underdefined because it is not stipulated how much, and what kind of processing, coming to terms with the past would be enough and satisfactory, so an important part of its use hinges on its capacity to generate a constant sense of inadequacy and remorse of conscience in its addressees, and to salvage for the generation of successors the opposition perpetrator-victim, together with the moral superiority and respectively, the compulsion to expiate, that follow from the former. When the place of processing the past is taken by the concept of culture, ethical asymmetry vanishes. However, when the Holocaust as culture is more than some grandiloquent vision and is understood as a task projected into the future, underdefinedness remains in place, for it is not clear what a culture that authentically follows from Auschwitz would look like, what its characteristics would be, just as it would be equally unclear when we might be in a position to say that we have understood the cultural consequences of the Holocaust, and are applying them.

In my reading *Liquidation* stands in a dramatic relationship with *Kaddish*, while its narrative structure is more reminiscent of *Fiasco*. At the centre of this dramatic relation stands the problem of writing and Auschwitz. This relationship cannot be reduced simplistically to the figure of B, who doesn't appear to the reader in unmediated fashion. According to B's faithful disciple, Keserű, "[t]here was a time when that secret was known, but now it has been forgotten, the world is composed of disintegrating fragments, an incoherent dark chaos, sustained by writing

---

The Holocaust as Culture, translated, with an Introduction, by Thomas Cooper (London—New York—Calcutta: Seagull, 2018), 77.

alone. If you have a concept of the world, if you have not yet forgotten all that has happened, that you have a world at all, it is writing that has created that for you, and ceaselessly goes on creating it; Logos, the invisible spider's thread that holds our lives together."[46] That is, according to Keserű the world is not outside, neither is the past located in time, but they are brought into existence by writing. Auschwitz, too, is brought into being by writing, but this is only possible because Auschwitz is first and foremost a reality that ceaselessly provokes the whole order of language. In writing about "the patient of Auschwitz," at the end of his critique Radnóti arrives at another version of extinguishing reality, stating that Auschwitz, "much as it may be one of the weightiest words in our language, is nevertheless only a word."[47] He who in Cracow gets on the bus bound to "Oświęcim" to visit the erstwhile concentration camp can feel every minute of their stay that Auschwitz is a magnetised place of history forever lagging behind its own past, filled with the past and the present at the same time, and the one leaving it can also realise why Auschwitz continues to be the unavoidable vanishing point, beyond identity politics and ideologies, of shifts in the social sphere of the present. In writing this I am also implicitly stating that for the gaze fixed on Auschwitz, the suffering of European citizens labelled Jews, Roma, mentally deficient simultaneously carries personal and universal meaning, without any group's suffering becoming privileged to the detriment of others. While in Kertész's diaries racist outlashing is not infrequent, especially when writing about Muslims, he captures this with unparalleled precision in *Dossier K,* when he establishes the frameworks of interpretation in *Fatelessness* as follows: "What I wrote about was a condition, and although the novel tries

---

46   Kertész, *Liquidation*, 97.
47   Sándor Radnóti, "Auschwitz betege," 104.

to turn the unsayable lived perception of the death camps into human experience, nevertheless what I was mostly interested in was the ethical consequences of living-through and survival. That's why I chose the title *Fatelessness*. For the camps' lived perception becomes human experience where I uncover the universality of that lived perception. And this is fatelessness, that specific trait of dictatorships, the appropriation of the own fate and turning it into mass fate, the stripping of man of his most human essence."[48]

The ethical weight of these insights becomes truly obvious when no surviving witness is left. Bee was born in Auschwitz, which makes him the last member of the generation of survivors and at the same time the first member of the second generation. Let's not forget that according to Kertész, it was an error from the beginning to designate the speech act of testimony as the foundation of the memory of Auschwitz, for the greatest enemy of testimony is the passage of time with which no dialogue is possible. What Kertész writes about Jean Améry he could as well have written about himself: "if he wished to survive his survival, if he wanted to invest it with some meaning, or rather content, then, as a writer, he was compelled to see that the only chance to do so lay in self-documentation, self-examination, objectification, in other words, culture."[49] Thus, if he wanted to confront finitude, amoral time, he needed to stake his life on writing —that is, on fiction, on the aesthetic outlook, on imagining Auschwitz, as he had put it in *Dossier K*,[50] rather than on testifying objectivity.

The characters of *Liquidation*, whom we see and hear, are suddenly left to their own devices by the surviving witness, who had also been their mentor, the one who shaped their lives. In this situation they are confronted with the fact that Bee's life-choice, the choice of writing, may have

---

48　　Kertész, *K. Dosszié,* 85.
49　　Kertész, *The Holocaust as Culture,* 65.
50　　Kertész, *K. dosszié*, 14.

been a mistake. Judit's other explanation for Bee's suicide is that, although Bee was a writer, for "this was his sole means of expression," this doesn't mean that he had no talent for anything else; it means that Auschwitz cannot be experienced and placed authentically in the present in any other way but by the aesthetic outlook. Bee, however, had atrophied life around him in the process and for the sake of writing. "A person's true means of expression, however, he was always saying, is his life. Living the shame of life and maintaining silence, that was the greatest accomplishment of all. How many times he came out with that, oh, how many times, to the point of insanity."[51] Seen from Judit's perspective, in *Liquidation* a dramatic light is cast on the whole oeuvre's shame and fiasco, as an unavoidable consequence, independent of the work's aesthetic success. Shame and fiasco, in so far as what has been created is literature; I think that this explanation of Judit is organically intertwined with Kertész's whole life-work.

In this respect the regime change is only important because the dictatorship that existed between 1949 and 1989 rendered many things of Auschwitz directly visible by analogy in the material and life-world. But if anybody, then Kertész was surely aware at the end of the 1990s, the beginning of the 2000s—the putative time period of the genesis of *Liquidation*—that against the high hopes, with the regime change Europe had not stepped out of the world of Auschwitz. It only passed over into another period of that world with vastly different ethical circumstances: the post-testimonial age. An age in which the question, charged with doubt and the terrible blocks of non-knowledge, remains, more than ever: what will the fate of Auschwitz be in the order of discourse? This fate mostly depends on the question whether Auschwitz can be preserved, and if yes, in what way: that is, if the material world of the camps,

---

51   Kertész, *Liquidation*, 107.

wherever they are located, can be preserved, and whether and how we can uncover and keep on the surface of memory the microhistorical details of genocides.

For this question it is not irrelevant that Kertész places the suicide Bee and his heirs at the closure of his oeuvre, and the act of suicide is enmeshed with a symbolic date, 1989. In her excellent *Mourning Modernism,* Lecia Rosenthal points out that the awareness of finitude, of ending belongs to the essence of late modernism, precisely because it is aware of being belated, and its whole history is shot through with a discourse about the end and ending as a catastrophe.[52] The imagining of the end has a corollary in the symbolic forms of survival: memory, mourning, melancholia, the preservation and destruction of manuscripts. That is, late modernism's sense of an ending, which becomes dominant in Kertész' late work, paradoxically engenders the compulsion of repetition and testimony; it is not simply dependent on the future,[53] but first and foremost it attempts to shape that future.

---

52   Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism. Literature, Catastrophe and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 3.

53   Ibid., 4.

Aura Poenar

WITNESSING THE TRAUMA.
A STUDY ON THE TEMPORALITIES
AND ETHICS OF THE IMAGE

There is never one image

From the outset of modernity, the issue of how we look at images has come to the fore of visual theory. As images tend to aggregate in a repository of historical events, the attention to what is disruptive in them has prompted various interpretative positions, mostly informed by claims that commercial mechanisms have undermined any capacity for critical thinking and that images are too limited in scope to be able to speak 'truthfully' of traumatic events.

In investigating the idea of testimony and the question of ethics in relation to images that speak of traumatic events, we will analyse a few case studies to observe how and why one of the key problems opened by modernism is connected to the necessity to distinguish between an ethical and an unethical image. In probing into what makes an ethical or unethical image, we will investigate the relation between time, memory and *symptom* starting from the understanding that an image is a fluid montage (which incidentally is another modernist lesson worth keeping). According to Godard,[1] we are never in front of one image; there are always at least two images which, in their clash or encounter, produce a third image, and so on. We need to stress that in this montage images are not passive or reducible to passivity, but they rather work as a way of

---

1   *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, édition établie par Alain Bergala (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1998).

establishing a relation, as Jacques Rancière put it, they are a (form of) cooperation, not reproductions but mere displacements and condensations.[2] Although a montage may be seamlessly fluid, there is no sense of continuity implied as, at the heart of any montage lies an inherent fragmentation that subjects any image to such complex processes as contamination, manipulation, and temporal stratification. When we speak of contamination or temporal stratification we think in terms of *symptom*, as defined by Aby Warburg in the high time of Modernism.[3] A symptom is that which is disruptive or upsetting in the coherence of an image. To Slavoj Žižek, the moment there is an excess, the moment a system fails is the key to understanding the system.[4] As far as our study is concerned, symptoms, identified as noise or disruption in the coherence of the whole, are not just deviations in an image (narrative), or contingent excesses, but are key to understanding a particular image (narrative). Our thesis is that the tensions produced by crises, disturbances or residues in an image are conducive to a better reading and understanding of that image. In the dialectical relationship between symptom and image, a symptom is not instrumental simply in the sense of providing a basis, an explanation for the image; a symptom also explains why the illusion of a full subject, of the coherence or completeness of an image ultimately fails. The residual, the noise, that which does not fit into a homogeneous whole, displacements and obstacles become the very instrument

---

2   Jacques Rancière, *Le travail des images. Conversations avec Andrea Soto Calderón* (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2019), 44.

3   Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002).

4   Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

of our analysis. Noise accounts for temporal stratifica-
tion and these multiple stratifications permeate narratives.
Since montage is (a form of) manipulation and any image
is (the result of) montage, every image contains a form
of manipulation. The idea of manipulation does not carry
a negative weight. What we need to ask is when or how
does it become negative? This underlying question in-
forms our approach to the ethics of the image. French phi-
losopher Jean-Luc Nancy[5] thought that the great turning
point of philosophy was the shift from the idea that image
is a lie to the idea that truth is an image. This is a crucial
aspect in our approach here, because the relationship be-
tween image and narrative (history) goes two ways. On
the one hand, images produce an effect of truth, on the
other, truth becomes an image of the real. As Judith Butler
rightly points out, our passive reception allows for us to
be recruited into a *certain framing of reality* which is both
constructed and interpreted to build *a certain reality*.[6] In
this sense, understanding images as montage (and treating
images as open questions) also entails exposing how the
frame which orchestrates positions and delimits the visual
field "does not simply exhibit reality, but actively partic-
ipates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing
and enforcing what will count as reality."[7]

The movement not to make

The question that arises here is, how can we interrogate
the 'truth' of an image? In order to tackle this question, we
will look at images with two key questions in mind: what
do we see in the image? and what is the image telling us?

---

5   Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image,* translated
by Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
6   Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*
(London: Verso, 2009), xii.
7   Ibid., xiii.

In other words, what does our reading of that image reveal (to or about us)?

In 2018, the world press photo of the year prize went to a photograph (by Ronaldo Schemidt) of a man catching fire amid street unrest following protests against President Nicolás Maduro, in Caracas, Venezuela, on 3 May 2017.[8] We will not discuss here the rather manipulative description of the photo posing as objective journalism. What we wish to question is the possibility of showing or speaking of catastrophe without aestheticising pain. Here we have the photograph of a burning man whose face we cannot see. The angle and framing give the viewer the impression that the man just seems to be running past us as we notice his white t-shirt ablaze and the black gas mask, making for a very dramatic impact. All this happens against a red brick wall bouncing back, in a very aesthetically pleasing composition, a warm glow neatly tying the entire frame together. So what is wrong with this photo? When we look at it, we see *energy, colour, movement,* we notice *a great sense of composition*, and if we read the description and think of how the man's face is covered, we get the *idea of a whole country burning*. If we look closer and more carefully, we see this small detail, a gun painted on the wall with the word *paz* (peace) coming, like a bullet, out of it, *adding strength* to the picture and to its *symbolism*. These are just some of the highlights of the jury's appreciation. Which brings us to our point. What has the hand done and to what purpose? It's like we were hand-held and guided through all the pointers that are important for the jury: the visual impact, the drama captured in the decisive moment. But what is the photo also telling us? A man is in danger, most probably in pain, and he might die. From the series of photos of the man on fire, the one that has been

---

8   https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/ photo-contest/2018/ronaldo-schemidt/1

selected is the one isolating the man in the frame from the rest of the protesters. There is almost no context here to explain the events without the photo description, no real sense of the violent clashes, unless we extrapolate on the *little details* that *stand out*. As Judith Butler points out, by focusing on the target, on the victim, the frame structures the visual field so that it makes possible, produces and orchestrates the position of the aggressor. The technological "grasping and circulation is already an interpretive manoeuvre, a way of giving an account of whose life *is* a life, and whose life is effectively transformed into an instrument, a target, or a number, or is effaced with only a trace remaining or none at all."[9] In an interview with AFP the photographer said that he didn't see the burning man. "I just felt the explosion, the heat, and started taking pictures [...] I only realised a few seconds later that it was a person on fire." Yet the photograph does not communicate this confusion and frantic movement. There is no gestural quality to the photograph, no visual event circulating (or attesting to) any confusion or sense of urgency. Against the neatly framed/cropped image, his comments sound more like a proactive excuse meant to prevent any critical backlash. "When I saw the pictures, I felt shocked—for the young man, for the accident, for the level of violence the conflict had escalated to."[10] The issue at hand is not the moral obligation of the photographer to intervene or, on the contrary, not to intervene. It rather dwells on the effect, on how the photo was edited with that effect in mind, on the jury's appreciation for the careful framing and composition of the photo, which makes us no longer see a man suffering, but only contemplate an aestheticised image, an idea, a symbol. The underlying problem we are driving at

9   Butler, *Frames of*, ix-xi
10   https://www.afp.com/en/inside-afp/searing-venezuela-shot-was-personal-afp-photographer (last accessed June 20, 2022).

here is the aestheticisation of suffering, since the truth is shown without interrogating how this showing is done. It is this aestheticisation that is unethical.

In 1991 Greg Marinovich had won a Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography for a series of photographs showing supporters of South Africa's African National Congress brutally murdering a man they thought to be a Zulu spy. One of the photos, *Human Torch*, shows the man burning to death. The photo contains and communicates what Schemidt's image does not: the frantic context of a horrifying deed that cannot be undone, it shows the attackers, it gives a sense of the photographer's place, of him being involved. The violence and rapidity of the events is visible in the imperfect image (not closely cropped, no noise reduction, no editing). We are not wowed by an artistic product. And, most importantly, we don't see the scene from the perspective of the aggressor, because the aggressor is in the frame and that communicates shock and fear, a sense of the danger that the photographer was also in. In order to show the victim's side, the camera had to be positioned so that it included the victim's perspective, not the aggressor's viewpoint. Jacques Rivette famously insists on the risk of creating a beautiful image through the visual impact of vulnerability, misery, grief, and, ultimately, death. How could one not feel as an imposter when filming something so inscrutable as death, he wonders, criticizing Gillo Pontecorvo's choice of filming the suicide scene in *Kapò* (1960): "Look however in Kapò, the shot where Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on electric barbwire: the man who decides at this moment to make a forward tracking shot to reframe the dead body— carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the

final framing—this man is worthy of the most profound contempt."[11]

What remains to be grasped is how to avoid being an imposter, how to do facts justice. Rivette's answer is to somehow find a way to include an interrogation in what is being shown or filmed. His critique is not aimed at questioning the intention. Pontecorvo's intention was to depict the horror of Auschwitz. It is—yet another lesson of modernism—not the why, but the how and the what (the hand has done and to what purpose). Alain Resnais later commented in an interview for *Cahiers du cinéma* that the images of the camps are not meant to be re-enacted through fiction or used to create a mise-en-scène,[12] at least not with realistic ease and not without including moral or aesthetic justifications in the choices of camera framing and movement. In his critique, Rivette points out the rather different account that Alain Resnais gives of the death camps in *Nuit et Brouillard* (1956), factoring in the tension produced by the montage of documentary footage and contemporary images of the extermination camps. The effect, instead of imposing an answer or a conclusion through an artful resolution of the frame, is that of posing questions that cannot be avoided despite the fact they cannot be answered: "for many reasons, easy to understand, absolute realism, or what can substitute for it in the cinema, is impossible here; any attempt in this direction is necessarily incomplete ("therefore immoral"), any attempt at re-enactment or make-up derisory and grotesque, any

---

11   Jacques Rivette, "De l'abjection," *Cahiers du cinéma* 120 (juin 1961): 54-55. Unless otherwise noted, all the translations into English are mine.

12   Alain Resnais, "Les photos jaunies ne m'émeuvent pas," propos recueillis par Antoine De Baecque et Claire Vassé, *Cahiers du cinéma* (hors-série "Le Siècle du cinéma," novembre 2000), 74.

traditional approach to the "spectacle" amounts to voyeur-
ism and pornography."[13]

    The gravity of the gesture in Pontecorvo's case was, in
Rivette's eyes, the choice to aestheticise through a "sim-
ple camera movement (that) was the one movement not
to make," as Serge Daney points out in a commentary on
how to provide a true, just representation of horror and,
in doing that, how to avoid letting the viewer get used to
horror.[14] The latter agrees with Rivette that "abjection is
the aestheticization of the frame (the risk of creating a
beautiful form, a seductive object by exploiting the aes-
thetic potential at the heart of death, fragility, or pain)."[15]
Georges Didi-Huberman astutely observes that Rivette
saw in *Nuit et brouillard* the "obligation not to run away
from our history, the anti-spectacle par excellence, the in-
junction to understand that the human condition and in-
dustrial slaughter were not incompatible and that the worst
had just happened."[16] As he further observes, the whole
point was to *disrupt the memory generated by the con-
tradiction between the inevitable documents of history
and the recurring marks of the present* which come from
Resnais's *subjectless gaze over the empty landscapes of
the camps captured in colour*.[17] The debate that started
with Pontecorvo's movie has further aggravated with es-
capist films such as *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg,
1993) or *La vita è bella* (Roberto Benigni, 1997). These
shared the same approach, of romanticising horror through

    13   Rivette, "De l'abjection," 54-55.

    14   See also Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York:
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 14-15.

    15   Serge Daney, "Le travelling de *Kapo,*" *Trafic* 4 (au-
tomne 1992).

    16   Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris:
Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003), 163.

    17   Ibid., 164.

one character's selfless gesture or sacrifice,[18] to a kindred effect of making the death camps "physically tolerable for the viewer who cannot help but conclude, perhaps unconsciously, that [...] it was not intolerable."[19] The danger that Rivette perceives and insists on here is that people would end up getting used to the horror in complicity. This would gradually become part of the norm and end up defining the mental landscape of Modernity and of modern man. "Who will be able, the next time," asks, rather rhetorically, Rivette, "to be shocked or outraged by what will indeed have ceased to be shocking?"[20] The overflow of intolerable images in the contemporary media exploiting the shock and the trauma have had their part in turning the horror and the catastrophe into spectacle, thus fuelling an endless debate throughout (post)modernity around the various discourses on the critical approach of images.

In front of an image such as that of the man who caught fire during street riots in Venezuela, we can almost picture the intentional gesture of the photographer locking in on the burning silhouette, panning the moving figure and waiting for the decisive moment, carefully considering the frame before hitting the shutter-release button. It may have happened too quickly for any of these gestures to be premeditated, yet the image tells a different story. What the hand has chosen to do when editing the photo changes the story the photo is telling us. To Rivette, the filmmaker's judgement of what they are showing reflects in and decides

---

18   A critique of Holocaust cinematic culture and an extensive analysis of Holocaust films and their underlying aesthetic ideology can be found in Terri Ginsberg, *Holocaust Film. The Political Aesthetics of Ideology* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

19   Rivette, "De l'abjection," 54-55.

20   Ibid., 54-55.

how they show it. It is unavoidable—he concludes—that they should be judged by the way they show it.[21]

Judging what to show, waiting for the right moment to close in on a frame in order to tell a story meant to depict the famine in Sudan was also what South African photojournalist, Kevin Carter, did, thus taking what was to become one of the most controversial photographs in the history of photojournalism: a starving girl struggling to get to a feeding centre while stalked by a vulture who waited for her to die in order to feed on her. "To get the two in focus, Carter approached the scene very slowly so as not to scare the vulture away [...] He took a few more photos before chasing the bird away."[22] The photograph, first published in the *New York Times*, brought him the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography award in 1994. It was also met with a surge of outrage since the photographer appeared to have waited for the right moment to get the most spectacular shot instead of helping the child. Was he not just another predator as well, a human vulture on the scene? A couple of months later Kevin Carter committed suicide. His last note confessed to his depression and turmoil: "[...]I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain… of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners."[23] Considering his interrogation of what and how much to show, how to get the situation across, how to communicate the plight of starvation, to make it visible to a society that was no longer in touch with the reality of food scarcity, the violent reaction of the public had maybe once more missed the mark in front of an image so arresting, so apt to "tear down the wall of indifference that separates the

---

21   "c'est que le cinéaste juge ce qu'il montre, et est jugé par la façon dont il le montre," ibid., 54-55.

22   https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/vulture-little-girl/.

23   Ibid.

Western viewer from this distant famine."[24] Was the violence of the reactions not triggered by an immodesty in the face of these images (a refusal to look at them and accept accountability for our own part in their history)? Was this violent reaction to a photograph not an incensed response stirred by an image that also exposed the guilt of the Western viewer? Asking a photographer to intervene where their intervention would make no difference is not only unrealistic, but misses the point entirely: their role, as a witness, of finding a way to voice the pain and the tragedy they happen upon so that it can become visible. It is partly asking too much of the photographer (to solve an impossible situation) and too little of the photograph (just to reassure the viewer, not to stir their conscience). What we see in this image is a system that creates inequality and famine (a hidden reality of the consumerist society). What the image also shows us is the reality we do not want to see, our complicity in the system; hence, a feeling of guilt about a denied or invisible state of things. The image tells us that we are also responsible for this. While denouncing the system that creates inequality, the photographer knows he is part of a system of (image) consumers, a system that has ended up turning commodities into images and images into commodities.

Seeing is knowing better

In *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) Harun Farocki uses a short unconventional documentary-essay format to criticise the use of chemical weapons and the role of the industry in the Vietnam War. To this end, he combines text, commentary, and images compiled from the mainstream media starting with one question: will we believe the truth of the image of

---

24   Jacques Rancière, "L'image intolérable," *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008), 109.

napalm burns if we see it? Instead of showing the images, he first makes a different gesture meant to help us imagine the napalm burns: "If we show you pictures of napalm victims, you'll close your eyes. First you'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close them to the memory. And then you'll close your eyes to the facts."[25] The gesture of putting out a cigarette on his arm has no violence or aggressiveness to it, not more than the gesture of putting out a cigarette in an ashtray, and this conflicting semantics interpellates the viewer. No drama is involved, no aestheticisation. Yet the message that comes across is very clear: no amount of empathy would make any difference to the victims of this industry. "When napalm is burning, it is too late to extinguish it. You have to fight napalm where it is produced: in the factories."[26]

In 2013, the *Save Rosia Montana* campaign to prevent an international mining project from exploiting gold and silver in the Apuseni Mountains of Romania using blasting and cyanide extraction with devastating consequences for the environment, took the whole country by storm. It was a rare example of common solidarity expressed in Romania against aggressive corporate tactics which risked impacting the livelihood of already impoverished communities. What caught our attention in this campaign were two videos[27] released to denounce the project's brutality and to urge people to join the protest. In the first ad actress Maia Morgenstern steps into the frame of what looks like a bleak and barren postapocalyptic site, sits down at a table and takes out her jewellery while looking into the camera, addressing those (?) who are after the country's

---

25   Harun Farocki, *Nicht löschbares Feuer* (The Inextinguishable Fire), 1969.

26   Ibid.

27   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4bG7oil3gU; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdYPoYk9dXQ (last accessed June 20, 2022).

gold. Instead of removing her last piece of jewellery, the earrings, she rips them from her ears, with accompanying dramatic music and dripping blood to further emphasise the painful gesture. The same gesture is repeated, in a different ad, by actor Dragoș Bucur. In (seemingly) agonising pain, he appears to be pulling out his own gold tooth crown. We are not questioning the intention here, which was to sensitise people to the reprehensible greed of the parties involved in the mining project. The violent self-harming gesture and the way the actors act out physical pain is, in our view, unethical. It is not a matter of the gesture being real or not. What is off throwing is the violence and pathos of the gesture: both are staged and acted out by two well-known actors who come before us as themselves (not as characters in a role), yet deliver their message by acting. As the sequence of gestures ramps up to the climax of the self-inflicted violence with the message "here, you can have all my gold, but leave us alone," it misses the point on several grounds. To start with, it is an uncalled-for emotional manipulation of the viewer with no other purpose than the gratuitous shock produced by an unexpected gesture. The problem with this gesture is that it has no real substance, it is not meant to connect with people, but to create a rift; it does not open but closes any possible dialogue. It separates the actors making such radical gestures from those who watch them just like they would watch the performance of an actor playing a character with whom they may empathise yet will never mistake for a real person. The problem with these ads is the visual language they use. It is the same language used to convey a sense of drama and pathos in cinema, the same language people know from going to movie theatres. It is impactful and may give us goosebumps, but we know it's not real. It does not speak of real people with real problems. The other way in which it amounts to an unethical gesture in our view is by making it personal (displaying

the extreme gesture of a singular 'heroic' act), rather than collective (in spite of the *us* invoked). The actors do not speak for a people or of a people, their act is disconnected from the underprivileged in Romania today. What they do speak for is a nationalist identity idea. Moreover, by their sheer presence, they represent and inherently speak for social categories that do not include the poor communities directly affected by the gold-extracting project. The poor are (once again) not visible. Throughout modernity, the affluent countries have built their wealth on such predating practices, but the script directing the actors does not stem from that. Acknowledging this common background with the underprivileged would have been the first step towards allowing a space for those who are denied visibility to emerge. Yet, the 'us-against-them' message is not directed at, nor is it questioning a system that has been making such projects possible, choosing instead to tap into our ancestral self-victimising narrative as the poor (rich) country coveted and persecuted for its riches. This leaves out our own accountability as a people in a country shaped by views and practices we have so eagerly embraced from the corporations we don't even dare to point at. The lobbying and pressures from both international and domestic political figures exposed by independent journalist Mihai Goțiu in his book on *The Roșia Montană Affair*[28] remain unaccounted for. The ad's underlying idea of putting forward a radical gesture and (simulating) excruciating physical pain to (allegedly) evoke empathy misses the mark completely. The effect of the overlapping political/historical, cinematic, fictional semantic registers is that pain is aestheticised just as the acted pathos is. This is not ethically right in relation to the historical event/situation. While the impact is powerful, the gesture closes on (and thus resolves) its

---

28   Mihai Goțiu, *Afacerea Roșia Montană* (București: Tact, 2014).

own violence. Just like in cinema. It leaves no room for imagination, it leaves no trace behind, no lasting impact, no memory.[29]

In sharp contrast to the above example, Claude Lanzmann found his answers to how to communicate the horrors of history without turning trauma into a tool in creating a context that allowed the memory to emerge. In *Shoah* (1985), his film documenting the horrors of the Holocaust, he used no actors and no archive footage. There is a scene where one of the survivors, Abe, who had been selected to work as a barber in the gas chambers of Treblinka, is interviewed by Lanzmann while he is cutting a man's hair in a barbershop. In the death camps, barbers had to cut women's hair after the latter had left the undressing barracks thinking they would go into the gas chamber for a shower and then be sent out to work: "some of them, they were my close friends, and when they saw me all of them started hugging me. Then, what are you doing here? What's going to happen to us? What could you tell them? What could you tell?" (*Shoah*, 1985). As he

---

29   We wish to mention here an ad released in 2019 by a Romanian e-commerce company, as part of its campaign *celebrating the 30 years of freedom* since the fall of communism in Romania. The visual parallels with the imaginary of the Nazi extermination camps rendered through a Hollywood lens, the nonethical camera placement and montage, the reductive images informed by mystification and aesthetic manipulation are used only for dramatic effect. The choice of a train as a means of escape, culminating with the close up on the driver's face looking out the window in a direct replica to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) documentary poster, copying the exact alignment, angle and tilt of the body, eyes and face of the locomotive driver taking the train to Treblinka, is no less manipulative and unethical because it misrepresents both past and present and it exploits the traumas of history for commercial and marketing purposes (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6dgfhxBK9Q, last accessed June 20, 2022).

recounts the moment when the wife and sister of one of the barbers working in the gas chamber were brought into the room, his voice breaks, unable to continue the story whose horrific end we can already foresee: "A friend of mine worked as a barber, he was a good barber in my hometown. When his wife and his sister (were brought) to the gas chamber…" (*Shoah*, 1985). Lanzmann insists that he continues the story, urging him to put everything in words (*Go on, Abe, you must go on… You have to… please… You have to do it. I know and I apologise*). The camera closes in on Abe's face and follows him as he paces around, without changing the focal distance or adjusting the close up. Although it has moved forward, we get the sense we have taken a step back, it gives a sense of expectancy which is neither intrusive, nor aggressive. The camera does not harp on the emotional distress of the witness and does not instrumentalise the pain nor manipulate the viewer. It does not frame or enforce the pathos, but it creates room for pathos to emerge. It gives us the perspective of the victim and acts as a witness and, in so doing, it turns us, viewers, into witnesses, imparting to us a stance that we will never be able to shrug off, to unsee or to close our eyes on its memory.

A just image or just an image

The relation between image and truth, Didi-Huberman points out, is lacunary, fragile, and difficult to analyse. It's like dealing with a moving target. There are no road maps, no clear-cut answers, formulas or methods that would ensure or elicit the truth. His analysis of the only photographs that were taken from inside a gas chamber (by an anonymous member of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, August 1944) prompted an aggressive reaction from the *Les Temps Modernes* group which was adept to the idea of the unrepresentable. Didi-Huberman answered

these attacks in his book, *Images malgré tout* (*Images In Spite of All),* maintaining that he looked at these images as *image facts* since they were a *testimonial attempt* and a *political gesture* meant to both visually represent the terror of the death camps and to function as an act of defiance in trying to frame the extermination taking place in these camps and circulate an unimaginable experience to the world. A *simple image, inadequate but necessary, inexact but true is* the *eye of history* but it also is *in the eye of history*: "*To imagine in spite of all*, which calls for a difficult ethics of the image: neither the invisible par excellence (the laziness of the aesthete), nor the icon of horror (the laziness of the believer), nor the mere document (the laziness of the learned).[30]

In these terms, it is no longer a matter of choice, but of responsibility: "in order to know, we must *imagine* for ourselves[...] We are *obliged* to that oppressive imaginable."[31] But can one image help us better know our history? Can one image help us imagine the unimaginable? And in trying to find a language for catastrophe, don't we run the risk of manipulating and replacing the gaze on history and the real? In the introduction to *L'espèce humaine*, Robert Antelme comments on the impossibility of the survivors to put their ordeal into words. How, he asks, could they refrain from explaining how they got there? "And yet it was impossible. To ourselves, what we had to say was beginning to seem *unimaginable* [...] It was now clear that it was only by choice, that is, by imagination, that we could try to say something."[32] Didi-Huberman identifies in dealing with images of catastrophe the danger of *aestheticism*

---

[30]   Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 39.

[31]   Ibid., 9.

[32]   Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 9.

"that often fails to recognize history in its concrete singularities," that asks too little of the image, treating it as just a document. In the great narrative of the history of the Holocaust, the elimination of *concrete singularities* (of archive images or details considered to be marginal) amounts to what Annette Wieviorka calls *saturated memory*,[33] a resistance to archive, an inability to *establish links between historical singularities*.[34] All the elements that have been excluded or dismissed as unimportant when the four photographs were later published (cropped and retouched), are in fact vital for the image to be, in Hannah Arendt's terms, *an instant of truth*, capable of speaking of the context, the danger of the situation.

The second danger that Didi-Huberman identifies is that of *historicism,* which "often fails to recognize the image in its formal specificities" and asks too much of the image.[35] There is almost a ban on any representation or visual evocation of the event out of mistrust since no document can give the whole truth. Yet, the legibility of history is only possible by bringing into visibility the singularities which traverse it: "Auschwitz has become increasingly disconnected from the history that has produced it [...] turned into a concept, one of absolute evil [so much so that] the 'never again' of Auschwitz-Birkenau, saturated with morality, is ballasted with very little historical knowledge"—that (never accomplished) knowledge which consists of "making Auschwitz as legible as possible."[36]

Judging from how the media deals with the present trauma (the *never again* that continues to happen time and again), not only is current trauma mostly misrepresented

33   Annette Wieviorka, *Auschwitz, 60 ans après* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005), 9.

34   Georges Didi-Huberman, "Ouvrir les camps, fermer les yeux" *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 61:5 (2006): 1014.

35   Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all*, 26.

36   Didi-Huberman, "Ouvrir les camps," 1012.

and rendered invisible—either overstated (overexposed until the viewer becomes desensitised) or understated (underexposed)—, but also (carefully selected and orchestrated) past trauma becomes a most lucrative tool. The way the western media handles (*frames* and *circulates*) the traumatic events occurring today has increasingly led to present trauma being submitted to a similar process of saturation while the past trauma is selectively brought back (mishandled, removed from context) to reinforce an insatiable (unsaturated) memory of an 'atrocious' past that it needs to constantly shove in our faces as a scapegoat (and scarecrow) meant to both explain and divert our attention from the gross injustice of our present and to pre-emptively warn us of the (alleged) disaster that would entail any questioning of the current status quo.

A photograph can cover just as much as it reveals

Not all forms of manipulating documents of the past are intentionally negative. Nevertheless, that does not make the result less unethical. In the case of the four photographs from Auschwitz, the transmission of trauma was compromised by digitally performed cropping and noise reduction when they were formatted for publication. But when images are stripped of their context, they are also stripped of their temporality. In fact, the transmission itself disappears. The same goes for when we add something to an image (something that we consider is missing) in order to make it more relatable. Does, for example, adding colour to black and white photographs documenting traumatic events, even if unknowingly or unintentionally, not just instrumentalise images of victims in the same way that adding pathos does in the *Rosia Montana* ads or the tracking shot in *Kapo*? Our belief is that further manipulation does not add but takes away the context and its temporality. "Bringing the past to life: Brazilian artist turns

historic black and white photographs into stunning colour images using painstaking research" reads the title of one article on the topic of retouching. Published by *Daily Mail,* it sports an aesthetically-pleasing array of "some of history's most famous photographs re-envisioned in bold and vivid colours."[37] On 18 April 2018, the newspaper published another series of "painstakingly colourised" photographic portraits of a few prisoners, taken "as part of a project by Auschwitz-Birkenau officials to 'document' the prisoners of the death camp." The colourisation was done by the same artist, Marina Amaral, who was praised for "bringing to life their stories through her photo series *Faces of Auschwitz*." The tabloid-style title and wording and the emphasis of the capital letters are most reprehensible: "The terror of Auschwitz prisoners in colour: Captives sent to the death camp—including a heroine who ESCAPED—pose for newly colourised portraits other inmates were forced to take."[38] The slidable "switch" toggle can be moved back and forth, playing between the colourised and the original version of the photographs. One photo describes the "defiant stare into the camera" of a teenager to be "even more haunting in colour."

Another artist that has colourised archive images (some are the same images colourised by Marina Amaral, but to a radically different effect/result) justified his project along the lines that such images would help people to better empathise with the victims of the Holocaust: "I think that photographs in colour will humanize the victims of the holocaust. It seems to me that a well-done colorized image that uses contemporary photographic references is just as historically accurate as a black and white image if not more historically accurate since the world is not 'black

---

37   By Hannah Al-Othman for MAILONLINE, published 25 January 2017.

38   By Sara Malm for MAILONLINE, published 18 April 2018.

and white,'"[39] he writes on his website. His gesture and mindset are just another example of how contemporary ideology understands humanity in a certain framework that makes it impossible for us to relate to the idea of humanity or understand it outside that framework. Updating archive images so that they could grab our attention is a marketing strategy that sells, not because it helps us uncover something, but only because it is eye-catching. Yet, once again, it leaves no traces and no memory. It turns the victims into tools serving a certain purpose. These strategies (of seducing the young audience) are the exact opposite of eye opening, as Didi-Huberman observes:

> It is not a matter of purism (of the image): nothing is 'pure' in this field, and every image—from the moment it is taken—is the result of a technical operation, of a mediation, and thus of manipulation. The question is what we want to do with our manipulating hands: to stifle the images or to treat them with tact. It is also a question of recognising the limits of what we are doing. Why pretend to restore the truth in history while acknowledging that we want to 'seduce' and blow our minds? To blow the mind means to impress—war is impressive, anyway—but it also means to lie.[40]

How does this (alleged) art do justice to suffering and to the horrors of the extermination camps? To us it works as an example that not only reinforces Adorno's belief that "the production of beautiful and harmonious works of art is an ugly and barbaric lie in the face of such horrors as the Holocaust" but also works as an exemplification of what Marcuse called the "affirmative character of bourgeois art"

---

39 https://joachimwest.wordpress.com (November 6, 2016).
40 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues* (Paris: Minuit, 2018), 100.

that "functions as an alibi for an oppressive order rather than in opposition to it."[41] As Didi-Huberman points out, the problem is not the new technique used, but the gesture itself and its result.

> Colouring, a technique as old as the world, is nothing other than makeup: the application of a certain colour to a ground prepared for that purpose. Colouring means adding another visible thing to a visible thing. It means, therefore, to cover something of a surface, as any beauty product does. This is how one makes the real traces of time on a face invisible—or even the images of history. The lie is not that the images have been edited here, but in the claim to show us a naked and truthful face of war, where we are offered a made-up face, a bluff.[42]

The colourisation of images eliminates the (historical) distance that makes the image capable of interpellating us when we look at it. This (necessary) distance allows the brief instant of disturbance in the temporality (and narrative) of the image to speak of the horror and inhumanity of the camps. Is the act of colourising the photos taken in the death camps not similar to the gesture criticised by Rivette since, by appropriating it and seeking identification (through familiarity and relatability), it in fact renders the horror *physically tolerable for the viewer*, making it thus less *intolerable*? As Adorno explains in *Aesthetic Theory*, in order to be authentic, art has to "serve as a memory of suffering, to function as critique rather than be merely affirmative."[43] Is the image of the girl staring into the camera not powerful enough? Why the need to affirm

---

41   Qtd. in Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss. The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (London/New York: Verso, 2016), 243-244.

42   Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 100.

43   Qtd. in Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss*, 243.

its relatability and insist on its recognisability, to add more impact, to create aesthetically pleasing images or images that are produced by the aesthetic codes of today? The distance that these cultural norms automatically interpose between the viewer and the image is not a historical distance, but an aesthetic distance, which allows viewers to remain uninvolved observers of situations that do not include or concern them. Žižek notes how, contrary to how Lévinas saw in modernity the ethical responsibility to one-another in the *face-to-face encounter*, the images of suffering and the framing of faces we are bombarded with today are no longer subversions but expressions of contemporary ideology which "decides which faces we are allowed to see as worthy of grief and mourning and which not. Today, the very fragility of the suffering Other is part of the humanitarian ideological offensive."[44] Didi-Huberman points out that imagination is required in order to better understand and genuinely empathise with the trauma of the other and insists on the difference between imagination and identification. "To approach does not mean to appropriate," he says, suggesting, citing Proust, "to think in terms of a *necessary disappropriating approach* that both distorts the familiar and alters the identity, a brief instant when we lose all *spatial and temporal certainty* and we are enabled "to abruptly attend our own absence." Thus, he concludes, approaching images is not "usurping the place of the witness, or believing oneself to be there," but a difficult ethical task which determines the *readability of the image*.[45]

An archive is always at a lack

A series of photographs by Mathieu Pernot of Afghan migrants staying near Square Villemin in Paris in 2009

---

44   Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 828.
45   Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all*, 88.

showcases a very different approach. After spending sev-
eral afternoons with these groups, he decided "not to try
to create a connection, to stick to what everyone could see
as long as they were willing to look." Showing them in
their sleep taps into the violence at the heart of a biological
state that is displaced and disrupted by the precariousness
of their environment, by the vulnerability of the faceless
bodies lost in the realm of sleep, "of this elsewhere that
we will never know and which undoubtedly constitutes
their last escape" by bringing forth an impossible and ir-
reconcilable overlap of the periphery and the centre, of the
outcast and its viewer (without turning the viewer into a
voyeur). The violence stems from an impossible identifi-
cation. The difference of the other is disrupted by what
is shared (familiar, like the state of sleep) and predicated
on the constitutive identity of the other as outsider, "these
'repressed' figures of history, these figures of an inverted
globalisation." The artist's position opposes media over-
exposure by opting for distance and silence in not only
documenting the trauma but allowing the other to emerge
and to be seen. He photographed the migrants sleeping,
their bodies completely covered (not unlike a dead body),
"invisible, silent and anonymous, reduced to a simple
form," where resting is displaced by the need to hide "as
if they wanted to isolate themselves from a world that no
longer wanted to see them. Both present and absent, they
remind us of the bodies on the battlefields of a war that we
no longer see."[46] The works of Mathieu Pernot often incor-
porate pre-existing images. It is important, he says, to

---

46   All citations unaccounted for in this paragraph are
from http://www.mathieupernot.com/migrants.php. The images
were published by Mathieu Pernot, Portfolio Migrants in Études
photographiques (no. 27, May 2011, Paris, Société française de
photographie). The series was also featured in the exhibition
J'ai deux amours (16 November 2011—24 June 2011) at the
Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris.

continue to take photographs, but also "to remain in contact with the world and not just work with the images produced by it. My work is a sort of montage between the images I make and those I find."[47] The question of how to use the photographs he finds informs, what he calls, his *historian's approach* in an attempt to *give form to history*. Discussing a project about a recently discovered Roma concentration camp, he insisted on the importance of not interfering "artistically" in how the showing is done, not placing any emphasis, not *playing "the artist."* His main concern, he says, "was to find the museographic technique best suited to bringing this history to light by showing original archival documents, the photographs I had taken of the survivors, and the audio record of their testimony."[48] The documenting potential of images of suffering today is thus retrieved without stripping them of humanity or numbing us to the pervading tensions in our societies. An ethical approach that art can employ in dealing with the images of traumatic events starts from accepting the incomplete nature of any archive. Any archive is a montage through which the narrative of history is conveyed in relation to another image, to another piece of information. The work of Mathieu Pernot constantly interrogates the *question of the norm* and the *nature of the gaze* in both dealing with (documents of the) archive and the images we make:

> Every photograph is a discourse on the world, an idea we have about it. A postcard of housing developments and a photograph of a block imploding are two different discourses about the same place. What interests me is setting up a dialogue between these discourses, making the images dialectical. I photograph fragile, mobile situations, whereas the photographic apparatus

---

47   Mathieu Pernot, "Giving form to history" interview by Etienne Hatt, *VU mag* 5 (2010).
48   Ibid.

itself is "sedentary" and authoritarian, in the sense that it frames, withholds and fixes things. That's no doubt why every corpus is constituted by counter-shots, discontinuities and figures who are informed by different iconographies, as if they refused to be reduced to one form.[49]

Commenting on Adorno's position on art, Stuart Jeffries perceptively observes that "antagonism, contradiction and disharmony [are] the truths about the social relations under capitalism and art must reflect these."[50] Not only is art possible after the Shoah, but it is indeed necessary. Not because art has found a new object, but because it is essential in recovering a memory which is not entirely retrieved through archives. An unfinished project of modernity is also one of constantly exploring ethical ways to make art and to make images that are capable of speaking of or grasping the *truth* of our present and past. By observing how (using a commercial language) mediatic images are cut off from the tragedies of the history they are supposed to document, we have pointed out a few of the processes by which images of traumatic events are now rendered invisible, be they subject to various forms of censorship, or through an avalanche of visuals amounting to an overexposure effect. Our firm belief is that an ethical position stems from viewing images as *dispositives*, looking at them at work instead of seeing them as passive entities subordinated to language. As Rancière points out, images are a process (*les images sont un travail*),[51] therefore the question that we need to ask is not how to make images, but rather, what do images do? What operations do they set in motion? He insists that we must challenge

---

49   Mathieu Pernot, "Making Images Dialectical," interview by Etienne Hatt, *Art Press* 408 (2014).

50   Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss*, 244.

51   Rancière, *Le travail des images.*

the idea that we stand idly before images. "We are not in front of images, but in the midst of them, as they, in turn, are in our midst. The question is how to circulate among them, how to set them in motion, how to let them circulate."[52] Our investigation of various approaches to grasping catastrophe in an image, with particular attention to what makes an image ethical or unethical, stems from the assumed belief that this very modern issue of treating images as open questions, in line with a view on and of modernity as an unfinished project, is still urgently relevant nowadays.

---

[52] Jacques Rancière, "Le travail de l'image," *Multitudes* 28 (2007): 196.

INDEX

By summoning enriching new examples, as well as a remarkable depth of aesthetic analyses, *Temporalities of Modernism* succeeds in proving that we are far from being done examining the myriad subtle ways in which modernists have enriched our conception and our experience of time. In its final consideration of the ethics of resistance in which those who produce images of historical trauma engage, the book again opens salutary avenues for a reflection which is more than essential in our own times. This volume will definitely contribute to the welcome current trend toward a more global understanding of the phenomenon of modernism.

Valérie Bénéjam
(Nantes Université/ITEM-CNRS)

The contemporary energies behind *Temporalities of Modernism* are rooted in the turbulence of the modernist age: relativity, irreversibility, duration, fragmentation, contingency, and the looming threat of the apocalyptic future. The volume's transnational and multilingual perspective testifies to the increased relevance of modernist-inspired perceptions of time in the current geopolitical context. The highly relevant collection offers a fresh look at modernism's legacy and points to new directions in modernist studies in the 21st century.

Jolanta Wawrzycka
(Radford University)

www.ledizioni.it

24,00 euro

9 788855 268486