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Exploring New Avenues Beyond Literary Historicism: A Cross-Temporal and Cross-Cultural Dialogue Between American Posthistoricism and Slavic Literary Theory

Abstract. This study works toward filling the Slavic blind spot in American literary posthistoricist discourse. Drawing upon Rita Felski's onslaught on historicist contextualism, Russell Berman's refutation of periodization in literary studies, and Wai Chee Dimock's manifesto for a diachronic (post)historicism, it argues that these paradigms have shown a high degree of territorial confinement and would do better to engage with Slavic theories on literature. Given the centrality of the act of reception in posthistoricist perspectives on literature, the article posits the reception-oriented theories of the Prague School of Literary Studies and the Polish School of Literary Communication as the representative Slavic voices for symbiotic transactions with American posthistoricism(s). The resonant interactions the study orchestrates between these literary-theoretical paradigms across a spatial and temporal chasm pave the way for an amplified riposte to the hegemony of various historicizing tendencies in contemporary literary scholarship. The article does not limit itself to the mere refutation of literary historicism but also outlines a few posthistoricist directions that future literary/cultural scholarship could take. These alternatives, pivoting around the figure of the lay reader, could lead to the proliferation of studies on the history

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of reading and the dynamics of canon formation while questioning the viability of academically mandated interpretations of literary/cultural texts driven by the historicizing imperative.

Keywords: literary posthistoricism, postcritique, reception theory, concretization, resonance, Jan Mukařovský, Michał Głowiński

1. Introducing Literary/Cultural Postcritique and its Opposition to the Historicizing Imperative

Over the past decade and a half, the figure of Rita Felski has become almost synonymous with postcritique—a call for a radical break with various suspicious modes of interpretation that have gained wide currency in literary and cultural studies. Working in parallel, and often in collaboration, with other like-minded (post)critics, including Elizabeth Anker, Heather Love, and Toril Moi, to name a few, Felski has undertaken the rather ambitious project of recalibrating the methodological foundations of her field. Central to the idea of postcritique is its challenge to the authority of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in contemporary literary and cultural studies. The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" derives from the book *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur. In this book, Ricœur compares the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud to Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche and finds an underlying unifying characteristic in the *modus operandi* of the three intellectuals. According to Ricœur, "all three begin with [sic] suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering" recondite meanings beneath this illusion (34). Extending, or rather translating, this concept to the field of literary and cultural studies, Felski and her fellow proponents of postcritique employ the term "hermeneutics of suspicion" as a general rubric, subsuming under it a diverse array of contemporary literary theoretical paradigms that have come to be known as "critique."

The disagreement between critique and postcritique is as much a matter of mood as methodology. The affective stance of critique has been subjected to interrogation across diverse strands of postcritical practice. In an article titled "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," the queer theorist and pioneer of postcritique, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, excoriates a vast majority of critical reading practices as fundamentally paranoid insofar as they single-mindedly seek to ward off anticipated humiliation from an imagined enemy (136). Elsewhere, Bruno Latour, in his well-known essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam," resorts to psychological typology to describe scholars invested in critique as "mad scientists who have let the virus of critique out of the confines of their laboratories and cannot do anything now to limit its deleterious effects" (231). Notwithstanding Latour's obvious concerns about the consequences of critique being co-opted by right-wing forces, one cannot fail to notice his condemnation of the critical mood, which he describes in patently psychopathological terms. Similar characterological terms also abound in Felski's recent works, in which she compares the suspicious critic to an endless array of professionals, including doctors, scientists, archaeologists, and sleuths, to name a few. The

common thread that runs through all these seemingly arbitrary characterizations of critique is a pessimistic and relentlessly vigilant mood that seeks to plumb the depths of texts to unmask "unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see" (Felski, *The Limits* 1). Despite this emphasis on the affective stances of literary critical practices that one is bound to encounter frequently in postcritique, its proponents have not entirely brushed aside methodological issues.

In response to the methodological dogmatism of critique in literary and cultural studies, proponents of postcritique have called for an anti-elitist recalibration of the field that moves beyond the academically trained reader's suspicious readings of texts to embrace a wide range of affective and interpretive possibilities. In a thought-provoking article on postcritique and its positioning of extra-institutional reading, Tobias Skiveren points out that many of the method-ological innovations proposed by postcritique are founded on "a growing dissatisfaction with this [sic] long-standing tradition of dismissing the lay reader" (165). While critique strives to distinguish professional interpretation from amateur reading, postcritical scholars have taken upon themselves the seemingly paradoxical task of finding ways to simultaneously "account for the practices of professional as well as nonprofessional readers" (170). Given how lay reading practices are anathema to most professionally mandated critical reading methods, Skiveren remains skeptical of the viability of a project seeking to reconcile the two. Indeed, Felski and her fellow adherents of postcritique have yet to come up with a robust, coherent, and unequiv-ocally postcritical reading practice. All the same, their works have yielded a rich assortment of methodological signposts for future researchers committed to eschewing critique-inflected modes of literary and cultural analysis.

Rita Felski's forceful polemic against the pervasiveness of a suspicious mood within cri-tique-based modes of inquiry has tended to obscure her methodological objections to the fetishization of context in contemporary literary and cultural studies. In a paper titled "Context Stinks," published in *New Literary History* in 2011, Felski takes umbrage at critical historicism, which, she argues, is predicated on the assumption that historical context is a hermetically sealed entity (often called a *period*) within which individual texts are enclosed. From such a vantage point, texts are interesting to the literary and cultural studies scholar only insofar as they re-late to contemporaneous economic, political, and socio-cultural factors operating during their production. Felski's line of thought can be mapped to Russell A. Berman's observation that the "assertion of a periodic frame around multiple phenomena implies that their contemporaneity is itself of defining importance to their understanding" (320). It is this notion of contempora-neity, so dear to historicist contextualism, that has come under attack by literary and cultural theorists inclined towards postcritique. Felski argues that rigorous contextualism fails to do justice to the aesthetic dimension of texts, by virtue of which they form vast spatiotemporal networks across conventional historical and socio-cultural demarcations. In "Context Stinks," which was later modified and republished as a chapter in *The Limits of Critique,* Felski shows how her refutation of mainstream critical historicism is closely bound up with her larger post-critical agenda. She claims that one of the myriad ways a hermeneutics of suspicion manifests

itself is through an unquestioning reverence for the contemporaneous contextual forces that "shape and sustain" the literary text ("Context Stinks" 574). The critic who reads with an eye for such forces invariably ignores the agency of the text, subserviating it to a series of hidden social conditions of production waiting to be unearthed by a suspicious reader.

2. Setting up a Dialogue Between American Posthistoricism and Slavic Reception Study

Critical contextualism in its myriad forms has always been frowned upon by literary scholars committed to aestheticist or formalist standpoints. Felski's postcritical stance against contextualist readings, however, does not subscribe to either extreme of the aestheticism-historicism spectrum. Her quest to do justice to both the singularity and the worldliness of texts is part of a larger posthistoricist dissent against mainstream critical historicism from a non-formalist and non-aestheticist standpoint. One of the most oft-quoted theorists from this rich plethora of posthistoricist voices is Walter Benjamin, who, as Jeffrey Insko points out, "has become something of a touchstone for scholars interested in alternate modes of literary history" (119). In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin critiques the German historian Leopold von Ranke's injunction that the historian's task is to objectively reconstruct the past "as it really was" by isolating it from the rest of history (247). Benjamin laments the lack of empathy that the present displays towards the past in such conservative variants of historicism. However, Benjamin's objections seem to be directed primarily towards teleological visions of historiography that subscribe to rather puerile notions of "progress" (249–250). From a Benjaminian posthistoricist perspective, any articulation of history with a sense of *telos* tends to picture time rather naively as a straight arrow, disregarding its propensity to run in loops or trace out complex non-linear trajectories. In many ways, Rita Felski is a Benjaminian figure in her discipline. Felski objects to a (Rankean) "historicism that treats works of art only as cultural symptoms of their own moment, as moribund matter buried in the past" ("Context Stinks" 575). Her anti-teleological stance, too, shines forth in her commitment to conceive of "temporal interdependency without telos" and "movement without supersession" (578). Having thus distanced itself from the epistemology of literary historicism, Felski's version of literary posthistoricism demands its distinctive conceptual footholds.

A term that Felski invokes in her manifesto for a literary posthistoricism is "resonance"—an aural metaphor that is more commonly associated with the natural sciences. In acoustics, vibrating systems possess specific frequencies called resonant frequencies at which they enter into mutually reinforcing co-oscillations with other systems vibrating at any of these designated frequencies. Rainer Mühlhoff notes that resonance is "a very specific and selective case of interaction" that produces the maximal induced vibration in each participating system (191). The key takeaways from this succinct but reductive attempt at defining resonance are its *selectivity, mutuality*, and *amplificatory power*. These defining characteristics of resonance are also featured predominantly in Wai Chee Dimock's seminal enunciation of the concept as

a literary-theoretical metaphor in a 1997 article titled "A Theory of Resonance." Notably, the same article also provides much of the theoretical basis for Felski's onslaught on critical historicism. The concerns of Dimock and Felski unite in their objections to a "synchronic historicism" that refuses to extend "the hermeneutical horizon of the text … beyond the moment of composition" (Dimock 1061). Synchronic historicism entails slice-of-time periodizations that form the contextual backdrop against which literary or cultural texts are interpreted. Both Dimock and Felski argue that synchronic historicism's fixation with the context of production must make way for a diachronic historicism that views texts as "objects that do a lot of traveling: across space and especially across time" (1061). During these transcultural and transtemporal movements, they "run into new semantic networks [or] new ways of imputing meaning" (Felski, "Context Stinks" 580). Considering the extent to which this opposition to synchronic historicism threatens to subvert the historicist enterprise, both Felski and Dimock's project might as well be relabeled as a "diachronic posthistoricism."

It does not require a great stretch of imagination to grasp the connection between a diachronic posthistoricism and the idea of resonance, predicated as they are on the idea of textual mobility. As texts move across space and time, tunneling across synchronic contextual barriers, they interact with diverse semantic networks. In *specific* instances, texts *match frequencies* with the semantic network in which they are received, causing an *amplified* response—a phenomenon that could be regarded as the cultural analog of acoustic resonance. It is precisely this phenomenon that Dimock describes as "traveling frequencies of literary texts … causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places" (1061). Reception, therefore, invariably plays a pivotal role in the transtemporal movements of literary texts. Wai Chee Dimock stresses the importance of paying attention to "changes in the registers of reception" when texts travel across space and, more crucially, across time (1061). Russell Berman, too, contends that the very act of historicist periodization "suppresses the experience of reception" (328). A transtemporal perspective that does away with strictly delimited "slice of time" historical contexts is better equipped to engage with the reader's experiences, not just those of the professionally trained critic but also the lay reader. Readers, particularly those without academic affiliations, also lie at the heart of Rita Felsi's outline for a posthistoricist and postcritical study of literature. Felski stresses the importance of paying attention to what the text "makes possible in the viewer or reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what perceptual changes it triggers, what affective bonds it calls into being" ("Context Stinks" 585). Considering the centrality of the reader's experience to posthistoricist discourses in literature, the scant references to theories of reader-response and reception in the works of Feksi, Dimock, Berman, and other like-minded thinkers is a glaring void. This void is particularly conspicuous in the works of Felski and her fellow advocates of postcritique, who have elsewhere engaged in a sustained polemic against other dominant paradigms of contemporary literary theory.

To date, the encounter between postcritique and reception study has been tangential at best. Rita Felski's book *Uses of Literature* includes a passing reference to the phenomenologically

oriented models of reader-response developed by Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden. While Felski endorses Iser and Ingarden's emphasis on the interactive nature of reading, she takes umbrage at them for their formalist leanings, which, in her opinion, renders their "imagined readers … curiously bloodless and disembodied, stripped of all passions as well as of ethical or political commitments" (*Uses of Literature* 16). Closer to the discussion at hand, in "Context Stinks," Felski singles out for postcritical scrutiny two contextualist models of reception—Tony Bennett's "reading formations" and Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities." According to Felski, both models are methodologically suspect because they subordinate text to context by assuming that texts possess "no independent existence, no distinctive properties, no force, or presence of their own" ("Context Stinks" 586). The obvious superficiality of these arguments notwithstanding, it is worth noting that here, as in the rest of her works, Felski seldom wanders beyond the territorial expanse of America and Western Europe in her survey of paradigms of literary scholarship. Barring the perfunctory reference to Ingarden, Felski elides the rich tradition of reception study in Czech and Polish literary scholarship. One also searches in vain for a Slavic presence in Dimock's articulation of a diachronic (post)historicism, Berman's refutation of historicist periodization, or, for that matter, in the entirety of posthistoricist discourses produced within the territorial confines of America. This omission might not come across as too surprising after all, considering the more generalized blind spot for Central and Eastern European ideas in Western European and Anglo-American literary circles (Mrugalski et al. 4). This paper seeks to set up a cultural intercrossing between two such literary-theoretical paradigms which have never crossed paths - American posthistoricism and Slavic reception study. While Rita Felski, Wai Chee Dimock, and Russell A. Berman will contribute to the American posthistoricist voice, the Slavic perspective will be represented primarily by the reception-oriented theories of Jan Mukařovský', Felix Vodička, and Michał Głowiński.

On a parenthetical note, it must be acknowledged that the territorial epithets "American" and "Slavic" might seem to impose unduly restrictive spatial boundaries on a study committed to challenging a text's temporal boundaries of analysis. Such labels might also risk reintroducing the fallacious concept of stable national frames of reference into a framework of discursive entanglements. Nevertheless, the epithets mentioned above have been employed to emphasize the tendency towards territorial confinement exhibited by the literary-theoretical discourses being examined—a realization that will hopefully serve as a springboard for cross-cultural encounters such as the one carried out in this study. In other words, the labels "American" and "Slavic" will work toward their own dissolution within a more culturally entangled formulation of posthistoricism. In the process of this cross-cultural exchange, this study will also draw upon Dimock and Felski's articulations of resonance and transtemporal affinity to shape its methodological direction. For instance, it will shed light on the potential for resonance between aspects of Slavic literary theory and contemporary American articulations of posthistoricism. The analysis will also consciously try to avoid veering into the same teleological modes of historicism it sets out to refute. Instead of imbuing posthistoricism with a sense of telos, it will be guided by

the Benjaminian view of history as repetition. Nothing agrees with this study's stance towards history and temporality better than Dominick LaCapra's assertion that the "basic problems in the humanities are repeated (and repeatedly thought about) with variations over time, and temporality itself from a humanistic perspective is arguably this very process of repetition with variation or change" (156). From this perspective, posthistoricism is not an emphatic and incontrovertible victory over historicism; it has to repeatedly wrest the literary text from the clutches of a resilient and mutating historicism. Such a temporality paves the way for an appraisal of the potential for resonance between two apparently strange bedfellows—postcritique and Prague structuralist aesthetics.

3. Amplifying Jan Mukařovský's Inchoate Posthistoricism through Transtemporal Resonance

The incipient posthistoricism in the works of the Czech aesthetician and literary theorist Jan Mukařovský has almost entirely evaded scholarly attention in Anglophone literary studies. Mukařovský was a part of the core group of the Prague Circle of linguists and literary scholars—a group that also included his compatriots René Wellek and Bohuslav Havránek, and the eminent Russian expatriates Roman Jakobson and Nikolay Trubetskoy, among others. Invoking Mukařovsky in a postcritical study on literary posthistoricism might seem far-fetched, as few scholars could be further from a postcritical practice than someone who described his corpus of literary-critical and aesthetic studies as a "structural aesthetics." Adherents of postcritique tend to dismiss structuralist literary scholars as quintessentially suspicious readers who, in Felski's words, engage in "a single-minded digging for buried truths" (*The Limits* 33). However, the analogy between the structuralist literary scholar and the indefatigable archaeologist would be more appropriate to French structuralist practice than its Prague School namesake. Unlike the former's substantial, if not total, commitment to the purely synchronic (Saussurean) task of disclosing the *narrative langue* that undergirds multiple *narrative paroles*, the latter seeks a more dynamic integration of the synchronic and diachronic axes of analysis (Galan 8). In other words, Prague structuralism merges the synchronically inclined concept of *system* with the diachronically inclined concept of *evolution*. The Prague School agenda is nicely summed up by Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov's thesis that "every system necessarily exists as an evolution, whereas, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic nature" (48). The element of diachronicity in Prague structuralism orients it to engage with questions of literary history—an area of scholarly interest occupying a somewhat peripheral position within French structuralism.

As argued in this article, literary scholarship seeking to trace the transtemporal routes taken by literary or cultural texts can ill afford to ignore the diverse registers of receptive possibilities of these texts. In the Jakobson-Tynjanovian view of literary history mentioned above, the literary work remains "a free-floating abstraction ... cut loose from the producers as well as receivers" (Galan 142). It was Mukařovský's enunciation of the semiotic conception of a work of art that

was instrumental in foregrounding the role of the reader in the Prague Circle's literary aesthetic discourse. Drawing upon the Saussurean idea of the split sign, Mukařovský distinguishes between the material substratum of the work of art, which is analogous to the linguistic signifier, and the immaterial "aesthetic object" that embeds itself in the collective consciousness upon reception, which is roughly parallel to the signified (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 85). This notion of the work of art as a sign marks a significant albeit inhibited movement towards a reception-oriented literary analysis, although the reader (or the perceiver) remains subsumed under a somewhat vague category of *collective consciousness.* The intersection of literary history with reception aesthetics could, as indicated previously, prove to be a rather propitious combination for addressing questions of transtemporality in the study of literature. Interestingly, skipping forward more than half a century, the same concerns permeate Rita Felski and Wai Chee Dimock's rhetoric on diachronic (post)historicism. When placed in conversation with each other, these discursive paradigms, despite their separation in space and time, show a remarkable capacity for synergistic interaction—a phenomenon that Dimock and Felski would call 'resonance.'

Consider, for example, Mukařovský's reflections on the reception of the *poète maudits* (or the accursed poets) of the likes of Comte de Lautréamont, whose works failed to garner significant traction during their lifetimes. In his essay, "Art as a Semiotic Fact," Mukařovský deploys the example of the *poète maudits* to subvert the absolute analytical jurisdiction of a text's social context of production:

> The connection between certain works of art and the total context of social phenomena appears loose. The works of the so-called *poète maudits* … are alien to the standards of contemporary values. But it is just for this reason that they remain excluded from literature and are only accepted by the collectivity at a moment when, as a consequence of the evolution of social context, they become capable of expressing it. (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 84)

On the face of it, this rather elementary observation has a predominantly *axiological* import. Mukařovský seems to be making the platitudinous claim that the maximal *value* of a (literary) work of art could be realized in a social context far removed from its moment of composition. However, Mukařovský's observations also undermine the hegemony of historicist contextualism. If a work of art is found to be loosely bound by causal or correlational links to the "total context of social phenomena" at its point of origin, its capacity for forging transtemporal ties with other semantic networks is considerably enhanced. The works of the *poète maudits* might have failed to resonate with the "standards of contemporary values" prevailing at their moment of origin, but their transtemporal affinities with temporally subsequent webs of value exemplify the impossibility of hemming in a text by its originary context. Similar assertions recur throughout Mukařovský's works, particularly in the late 1930s and the early 1940s.

In his 1941 essay "Structuralism in Esthetics and Literary Studies," Mukařovský makes broader claims about the ontology of text-context relations. Mukařovský argues that developmental

changes in literature or art must not be regarded as "unconditional or direct consequences of the development of society" (74). He elaborates on this further—"Even if there were no other factors to consider, it would be impossible to deduce unambiguously from a particular state of society the art that would correspond to it, or to know a society from the art which it produced or accepted as its own" (74). Here again, Mukařovský almost explicitly repudiates what Joseph North has recently described as "a singular, scholarly, historicist/contextualist paradigm" that would go on to gain absolute pre-eminence in literary scholarship in the last quarter of the century (59). The cornerstone of this historicist/contextualist paradigm is an unequivocal causal or correlational link between a literary/cultural text and its contemporaneous social context, and it is precisely this precondition that Mukařovský's inchoate posthistoricism denies. Mukařovský's voice could find an unexpected amplifier in the postcritical arguments of Rita Felski, who stresses the inadequacies of contextualist historicism's imperative to highlight the "correlations, causalities, or homologies between text-as-object and context-as-container" ("Context Stinks" 577). "History," Felski goes on to argue, is "not a box" that encloses within it a passive "object" called the text (574). Mukařovský's ontology of text-context relations also summarily rejects this "object in a box" model.

From the early 1930s, which Peter Steiner regards as the beginning of the second (and arguably the most memorable) phase of Mukařovský's career, the structuralist aesthetician tended to regard text and context as two distinct but mutually interacting series—one literary and the other extraliterary. Each series had its distinctive structural characteristics and evolutionary pathways but constantly impinged on the other. In a memorable passage from his analysis of the minor Czech poet Milota Zdirad Polák's work "The Sublimity of Nature," Mukařovský claims—"It is impossible to reduce the history of one series to the status of a commentary on the history of another series under the pretense that one of them is subordinate while the other is superior" (qtd. in Galan 54). Put in other words, according to Mukařovský, the practice of subsuming text within context (or vice-versa) is no longer tenable. The individual text is inextricably entangled not only with other texts and a series of literary norms but also with a complex web of extraliterary norms. Also, as the *poète maudits* example indicates, these points of entanglement are often not determined by relations of simultaneity. Contrary to the historicist/contextualist tendency to pass over these asynchronous points of text-context interaction, Mukařovský frequently foregrounds them in his studies.

The overlapping preoccupations of Mukařovský, Felski, and Dimock do not end here. An essay by Mukařovský titled "Can There Be a Universal Aesthetic Value in Art" concerns itself with how literary (or artistic) works achieve universal value or "a prolonged and renewed resonance" across space and time (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 58). A similar preoccupation with literary endurance pervades Dimock and Felski's manifestos for a diachronic posthistoricism. It must be mentioned, though, that the "universal" in the Mukařovskian sense is not a relapse into formalist or aestheticist notions of timeless and ahistorical value in literary works. Mukařovský's essay cautions against "adopting a static conception of universal value" and instead characterizes it

as a "live energy which to remain active must of necessity renew itself" (60). On this point, Mukařovský's voice is scarcely distinguishable from that of Wai Chee Dimock, who argues that the endurance of a literary text can be attributed "not to the text's timeless strength but to something like its timeful unwieldiness" (1062). The dynamic state of constant renewal, which also permeates Mukařovský's other works, lends a distinctively non-formalist and non-aestheticist tenor to his notion of universality in literature (and art) à la Felski and Dimock. Mukařovský, like many of the contemporary proponents of postcritique, strives to reconcile the singularity of literary works with their sociability. However, unlike Felski, who redirects her readers to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Mukařovský provides a more detailed account of how a literary work, or any artwork for that matter, could retain vestiges of its universality amidst the constant flux of the semantic webs surrounding it.

The only point of rest in Mukařovský's heavily relativistic literary-theoretical and aesthetic formulation is the concept of an anthropological basis that informs the web of aesthetic norms against which a work is evaluated. This anthropological constant is enmeshed in the human psychophysiological constitution and "stays the same in different social milieux at different times" (Galan 168). According to Mukařovský, these anthropological postulates could explain the maximal cross-temporal and cross-cultural resonant potential, or the universal value, of specific literary works. Mukařovský nevertheless stops short of regarding the common anthropological principles as an absolute basis for the codification of prescriptive aesthetic norms. He avers that literary works will "always continue to reach the anthropological basis through new paths that it has not yet traveled," and each of these paths "corresponds to a certain social structure, or rather an existential attitude, which is peculiar to this structure" (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 68). In short, literary works, even those believed to be repositories of universal value, do not have a direct, unmediated communion with the anthropological base. Instead, they traverse constantly mutating, socially embedded webs of meaning and value that render the interpretation and evaluation of literary texts irreducibly dynamic processes.

Although the potential for resonance between the Mukařovskian text-context dynamic and the contemporary postcritical discourse on a transtemporal literary history is undeniable, the former lacks the methodological rigor to present itself as a viable alternative to mainstream critical historicism. In his own admission, Mukařovský calls his structuralist perspective on literature and art an "attitude" rather than a "theory" or "method." It is an epistemological position that cannot claim to be a "fixed body of knowledge" or a "homogenized and unchangeable set of working rules" that the terms theory and method imply ("Structuralism in Esthetics" 68). Mukařovskian practice is open-ended and leaves ample room for methodological refinement in light of future developments in the discipline. F.W. Galan, too, in his book-length study of Prague School structuralism, takes cognizance of Mukařovský's methodological vagueness (123). Galan questions the rationale behind Mukařovský's tendency to subordinate individual responses to the obscurely defined suprapersonal aggregate he calls "collective consciousness." These lacunae, nevertheless, provide significant leeway for devising novel postcritical and posthistoricist

interventions in literary and cultural scholarship. With this end in view, this study will adopt a moderately altered methodological approach from this point. Instead of focusing on individual theorists, it will give primacy to an individual concept, which, in turn, will weave together the perspectives of multiple theorists.

4. Promoting the Concept of Concretization as a Heuristic Tool in Literary Posthistoricism

It must by now be evident that a literary work, if it is to be viewed from a posthistoricist perspective, can no longer be regarded as a static entity having a stable and well-delimited extension in time. Various post-structuralist approaches to literature have already problematized the spatial boundaries of the text. Arguably, the most formidable challenge to conventional notions about the boundedness of a text was posed by the Russian-born Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva, who conceptualized a "literary word" as an "intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point" (36). The Kristevan concept of intertextuality weaves together Bakhtinian dialogism with French deconstruction, and it is hard to find better examples of cross-pollination between Slavic and Western European literary theoretical discourses. Intriguingly, though, "concretization"—another term emanating from Slavic literary theory—could prove congenial to a postcritical/posthistoricist literary scholarship inordinately confined to the Anglosphere. "Concretization" has become synonymous with reception-oriented literary theory in Slavic circles but has yet to gain any traction in American reception study. What makes the concept especially pertinent for this paper is that, besides serving as a point of contact between Anglophone and Slavic discourses on literature, it could play a role analogous to intertextuality in problematizing the temporal extension of the text. By viewing a text as an entity directed towards concretization rather than a mere material artifact, one is better placed to notice aspects of its complex transtemporal dynamics obscured by critical historicism.

The term "concretization" as a literary aesthetic concept can be traced back to the works of the Polish phenomenologist and aesthetician Roman Ingarden. Ingarden introduced the term while laying down the foundations of his philosophy of literature in two of his better-known books, which were later translated into English as *The Literary Work of Art* and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. In addition to influencing German Rezeptionsästhetik, better known in the English-speaking world as the "aesthetics of reception," the Ingardenian philosophy of literature also actively shaped various formulations of reception study in Slavic circles. Piotr Sadzik identifies the Prague school of structuralism and the Polish school of literary communication as two of the most clearly discernible centers of reception of the Ingardenian concept of concretization (914). However, by the time the term had traveled from Polish phenomenology to Prague structuralism and then back to the study of literary communication in Poland, it had undergone sweeping transformations. At the outset of this spatiotemporal odyssey, in the introduction to *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art,* Roman Ingarden categorically states, "The literary work of art ... must be distinguished from its concretizations, which arise from individual

readings of the work" (13). Regardless of subsequent semantic shifts, the term "concretization" would continue to retain this association with individual readings of texts. According to Ingarden, the literary work is a multilayered schematic structure with several "places of indeterminacy," which are filled in by the reader to produce individual concretizations.

Subsequent theorizations of concretization, however, take exception to Ingarden's scant regard for the social moorings of the reader. The Polish literary theorist, Michał Głowiński, finds fault with the perception that the phenomenon of concretization is carried out "in what may be called laboratory conditions, where nothing interferes with the process" ("On Concretization" 332). Felix Vodička, a Prague school theorist who reworked Ingarden's formulation, critiques the latter's conception of a concretization as being "independent of the literary norm of the period" (110). By itself, Ingarden's theorization of concretization proves inadequate to a posthistoricist approach since it fails to reconcile the uniqueness of a literary work with its sociability and, by implication, its transtemporal mobility. However, replacing the material text with its aesthetically realized concretization as the focal point of inquiry proved propitious to scholars seeking to integrate the reader (or the perceiver) into mainstream literary/cultural history. The most notable among them was a protégé of Mukařovský and a second-generation Prague School theorist, Felix Vodička. In his 1941 study, which was later translated into English and titled "The Concretization of the Literary Work," Vodička notes how the few sporadic forays into literary reception made by his contemporaries tended towards "aesthetic dogmatism [or] extreme subjectivism" (108). In an attempt to devise a more nuanced methodology for a literary history of reception, Vodička appropriates, or better yet, translates the Ingardenian articulation of concretization to align it better with the structuralist aesthetics of his mentor, Jan Mukařovský. As will soon be evident, the product of this inter-paradigmatic exchange renders the idea of "concretization" more commensurate with the American posthistoricist ethos.

To better understand the utility of concretization as a heuristic tool in dealing with literary posthistoricism, it is essential to reiterate one of the central theses of this paper—posthistoricism requires as a necessary precondition the premise that texts are temporally both mobile and labile. To his credit, Roman Ingarden did distinguish between the skeletal framework of the material literary work and its concretization, which comes into being when the reader fills in the schematic places of the work. However, Vodička's reformulation of concretization broadened the concept's domain and rendered it a suitable foothold for studying the transtemporal affinities of texts. For Vodička, concretizing a literary work entails not just "filling in" the schematic places of the work but, rather, a restructuring of the entire work "projected against the background of the [reader's] immediate literary tradition" (110). Although this quote refers only to the "literary tradition," indicating a predilection for formalism, Vodička tended to follow his mentor Jan Mukařovský's project of studying literary reception as a "complex process governed by the total structure of life and values of the period" ("Structuralism in Esthetics" 76). Since Vodička's views were prone to vacillation, even more so than Mukařovský's, the task of identifying the literary historian's unequivocal theoretical position is doomed to futility. What is more germane

to the matter at hand, however, is that Vodička's theory of reception foregrounds the pliability of a text when concretized against what Wai Chee Dimock would later go on to call shifting semantic webs bearing "witness to the advance and retreat of social norms" (1060). Therefore, texts traveling through time manifest themselves as concretizations, which, in turn, are subject to the flow and ebb of literary and extraliterary norms. Certain concretizations resonate with the prevailing web of social norms and gain salience, while others are eventually attenuated.

Interestingly, Vodička also applies the concept of concretization to what he calls "higher literary units"—in this case, "literary groups, literary periods, and national literatures" (129). The realization that even periodization schemes in literary scholarship are, in fact, concretizations, has profound posthistoricist implications that Vodička himself never recognized and, therefore, slipped back into more conventional modes of literary historicism. When placed in conversation with American posthistoricist discourses, the subversive potential of Vodička's insights becomes more apparent. For instance, Russell A. Berman offers a host of compelling reasons why embedding a literary work within its historical context of production, while "not inappropriate to the study of literature … is antiquarian, at best" (329). However, what could have further bolstered Berman's argument is the observation that any "historical context" posited by critical historicist modes of analysis is not a timeless unit perfectly immune to subsequent alterations in literary and extraliterary norms. For sure, Berman does talk about revisionist battles over prevailing periodization schemes, but he does not elaborate on how the same contextual label, say, for example, "Victorian" or "Sturm und Drang," could take up an entirely different shape over time. Placing Berman and his fellow American posthistoricist thinkers in conversation with Vodička on this point offers immense scope for a symbiotic cross-cultural and cross-temporal exchange.

If the literary text, as Anglophone posthistoricist commentaries contend, is a half-entity with no well-demarcated spatiotemporal expanse, so is its putative context. While discussing the concretization of higher literary units, Vodička declares that "even a literary period is a structure made rich by the dynamic tension of its components, so that a current conception is only one of many ways of concretizing it" (130). Just like the material substratum of a literary work, or any work of art for that matter, its "context" is realized only when it is concretized against the backdrop of the web of norms surrounding its reception. Hence, contextualization closely resembles reception insofar as both are *situated acts*. Inseparable from the concretizing processes that they are ceaselessly subjected to, both texts and contexts "constantly [change] under changing temporal, local, social, and even individual conditions" (110). Depending on the frame of reference, different aspects of a period (or any other higher literary unit) come into focus, while others might altogether fade into obscurity. Therefore, literary or cultural historicism, when pictured in the light of the aforementioned observations, is no longer a "pile of neatly stacked boxes," in each of which "individual texts are encased or held fast" (Felski 577). The boxes, standing in for contextualizing periods, ceaselessly resist their neat organization as they change shape when viewed from different frames of reference. Hence, the resistance to historicist contextualization is mutually reinforced by both text and context. The text, when viewed

as a material entity seeking concretization by the reader, tends to tunnel across contextual boundaries. On the other hand, the contextual boundaries themselves facilitate this slippage by tending to change shape upon concretization. In short, critical contextualization schemes are not just unduly restrictive but also ontologically unstable.

5. Tapping into Concretizations by Lay Readers as Testimonies of Reception

As mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the foremost commitments of postcritique is the reclamation of lay reading practices, which had hitherto been relegated to the margins of literary scholarship. Quite expectedly, the posthistoricist strand of postcritique, too, shares a fair amount of this enthusiasm for the lay reader. For instance, one of the many rationales Rita Felski provides for advancing Bruno Latour's actor-network theory as a processual guide in the study of transtemporal affinities is that it is "less censorious of ordinary experiences of reading" ("Context Stinks" 585). Acolytes of postcritique regard critical historicism as passé, not least because it calls forth a certain professional pride on the part of the academically trained reader, who probes for a text's links to its contemporaneous social conditions that lay readers often tend to ignore. In this regard, Vodička's outline for a history of reception of literary works fails to be postcritical (and posthistoricist) enough. Disregarding the importance of extra-institutional commentaries by lay readers in their diaries, memoirs, or letters as viable testimonies of concretization, Vodička asserts that it is the professional critic's role to "establish the concretizations of literary works, incorporating them into the system of literary values" (112). Vodička cites the subjectivity, heterogeneity, and ephemerality of lay reading experiences as grounds for their exclusion from his reception theory. The putatively enhanced objectivity of a reception study based on the academically mandated critic's concretizations, however, comes at a significant cost. With ordinary reading experiences no longer in the field of view, most new avenues for research on the transtemporal connections forged by texts are blotted out. It is precisely this narrowing of horizons that postcritical and posthistoricist discourses in literary/cultural studies tend to counter.

Until Felix Vodička, the notion of concretization asserts only a weak claim to the status of a critical concept in tracing transtemporal textual movements. After all, Vodička, for all his resourcefulness, remains firmly entrenched in contextualist analyses and professional elitism—both of which are largely anathema to postcritique and its allied project of posthistoricism. The theory of concretization could be given a more prominent posthistoricist inflection if one considers a lesser-known reworking of the concept by a literary theorist belonging to the Polish school of literary communication—Michał Głowiński. While Vodička's untenable quest for an Archimedean standpoint in reception study limits him to testimonies produced by professional literary critics, Głowiński significantly expands his repertoire of testimonies to include concretizations produced by untutored readers (Mrugalski 701). In one of his seminal essays on the various testimonies and styles of reception, Głowiński lists five kinds of testimonies that include all kinds of literary,

paraliterary, and critical documents. Among these, he assigns a prominent place to records of reading in intimate diaries and personal correspondences—a category summarily rejected by Vodička ("Testimonies" 12–13). Moreover, for Vodička, the context of *production* of a work simply makes way for the context of *reception*, and the latter is a relatively homogeneous "set of circumstances making it possible to perceive and evaluate a given work aesthetically" (119). In a way, Vodička's modified contextualism fails to do justice to Mukařovský's views on the web of social norms molding the act of reception. Mukařovský's context of reception, if at all it can be called a context, is far more heterogeneous and accommodative of lay readers. Głowiński arrests Vodička's backsliding into contextualism to some extent by not only heterogenizing the context of reception but calling into question the very possibility of a scientistic study of reception.

Although Głowiński's theory of reception would undoubtedly appeal to researchers invested in postcritique, how could one tap into his theory to generate new research possibilities in a posthistoricist (and postcritical) academe? Indeed, Głowiński's insights could be deployed as a point of departure for new scholarly approaches to the history of reading. Głowiński himself hints at a new area of scholarly inquiry in his essay "O konkretyzacji" ("On Concretization"). For Głowiński, unlike Vodička, a reading recalcitrant to the prevailing concretization norms could be more worthy of the literary historian's attention than more widely accepted interpretations. In a passage that has hardly garnered any scholarly attention, Głowiński hints at the value of such outlying responses to texts:

> Concretization may consist in a simple repetition of the interpretation prevailing in a given group, but it may crystallize in spite of the accepted interpretation of a given work—then it is also determined by this interpretation, though in a different way. There are situations when a work seems to be snowballed with concretizations, which cease to be a matter of individual approaches and gain the status of universal cultural values of the epoch. (343)

A literary/cultural studies scholar interested in the history of reading should find this excerpt particularly enlightening. Although it would be unfair to claim that the history of reading has swept recalcitrant readings produced by untutored readers under the carpet, they have so far mainly been considered peripheral to more urgent research questions. If made the focal point of scholarly inquiry, these outlying responses to literary works could significantly alter the landscape of literary studies, broadening the scope of some sub-disciplines while challenging the hegemony of others.

As Głowiński indicates in the quote above, a recalcitrant concretization could occasionally form the nucleus around which a subsequently normative concretization for a particular cohort of readers is crystallized. Invoking the terminology of Anglophone posthistoricism once again, these concretizations could prove to be a "resonant touchstone" that produces an unexpectedly amplified response among readers in a spatiotemporal coordinate far removed from the production of the work (Felski 588). This view has not been unheard of in literary history and

canon studies. If Franco Moretti is to be believed, ordinary readers play an active role in forming the canon through a "feedback loop of increasing returns" (211). The historian of reading would do well to investigate the dynamics of such transtemporal affinities with untutored reading communities. Moreover, any mention of resonance invokes the antithetical possibility of attenuation. If the resonant possibilities of outlying concretizations produced by lay readers are of considerable scholarly interest, so is the complementary question of how most of these readings lose salience when faced with institutional and/or market pressures, not to mention various other literary and extraliterary factors. Whether or not Bruno Latour's actor-network theory can provide a definitive answer to questions such as this is open to debate. Felski herself does not conclusively settle the debate—far from it. While such methodological skirmishes are best reserved for discussions in the future, it must by now be evident that posthistoricist literary studies could ill afford to discount ordinary readers if they wish to study the transtemporal dynamics of texts and their concretizations.

6. Conclusion

This research article is suffused with a plethora of intercrossings and entanglements. Arguably, the most emphasized intercrossing in this study is a spatial one that sets up a conduit between two mutually isolated bodies of discourse, each parochially confined to a set of spatial coordinates—'America' or 'Slavia,' as the case may be. However, this cross-cultural intercrossing also entails cross-temporal entanglements among literary-theoretical paradigms distributed across a span of around seven decades. Posthistoricism, which is at the core of this article, places a high premium on the tracing of transtemporal resonances. This study has itself engineered a resonant interaction across a cultural and temporal chasm, although the discursive paradigms involved in this case are primarily literary-theoretical or critical. In the process of these intersections, the discourses involved have mutually balanced out their blind spots and lacunae, thereby mounting an amplified diatribe against the persistent academic injunction to historicize literary (and cultural) texts. Metacritical reflections of this kind on the hegemony of historicism in literary/cultural studies, however, cannot be dismissed as mere intellectual navel-gazing, as they possess a substantial agentive force. They could significantly alter the landscape of literary research, rejuvenating sub-disciplines such as histories and ethnographies of reading, while simultaneously impeding the proliferation of interpretive studies involving varying but marked degrees of historicist contextualization. It is conceivable that the figure of the lay reader might take center stage in this posthistoricist upheaval. After all, lay readers play no mean role in transtemporal resonances and the attendant process of canon formation. Historians of reading and theorists of canon formation would do well to thematize these transtemporal (and transcultural) processes.

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An Anatomy of Melancholy, or The Strange Beauty in Walter Pater's *The Child in the House*

Abstract. The object of this paper is to offer a new understanding of Walter Pater's assessment of beauty as a process that contains within itself the pangs of melancholy; first, since Pater himself suggests in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* that beauty is to be investigated in its singular, relative appearance, I propose to examine his refusal of dogmatism to grasp the multifariousness of experience; second, I will turn to Pater's short story to provide an example of a perceiving subject whose appraisal of beauty is marred by a sense of melancholy. Employing Bourdieusian terminology, I will then argue that by positioning the appraisal of beauty as a Baudelarian practice that requires "a difficult initiation," Pater may also be aiming at legitimizing the role as a British aesthete as a nomothete of the autonomy of art. Lastly, I will consider some notions of Bachelard's *Poetics of Reverie*, as to explore the technique of imaginative recollection employed by Pater in *The Child in the House* is a crucial component in his effort to substantiate the far-reaching breadth of aesthetic perception as an experience that claims completeness in itself.

Keywords: beauty, aesthetic, perception, melancholy, autonomy of art, imaginative recollection

1. Introduction

Harold Bloom was quite right in affirming that the reader approaching Walter Pater for the first time can find most of his poetical creeds displayed in the short story entitled *The Child in the House*. First published in August 1878, it is the imaginary portrait of Florian, a typically Paterian protagonist, a sensitive young man, and it investigates the influence of his childhood experience upon the "process of brain-building," thus dramatizing the emergence of an aesthetic sensibility. Such a process begs for critical attention; Paterian aestheticism ought not to be prone to

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simplifications, so to avoid any crude, reductionist analysis, it is paramount that we discern the numerous implications that arise from his texts. With this objective in mind, I intend not merely to delineate the steps that lead Florian towards his aesthetic stance but also to qualify it, focusing on the Baudelarian 'strange nature' of beauty as it emerges from the story and positioning its oneiric nature in a comparative view with Bachelard's philosophy of reverie. In order to explore the peculiar quality of assessing beauty as it arises in *The Child in The House*, it is first paramount to ponder on Pater's thought of the relative, and therefore individualized, rendition of personal impression. Then, the short story will be analyzed in the context of the works of Charles Baudelaire, which will be interpreted in light of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the 'field.' The purpose of my proceeding is to contend that the melancholic quality of beauty in Pater ought to be interpreted as his effort to validate aesthetic sensibility as a complex epistemological mechanism aiming to perceive experience in its multilayered features.

2. *The Relative Quality*

No analysis of Pater's thought can proceed without an understanding of his championing the cause of the relative spirit, which he exalts for its capacity to "grasp the dynamism and the associative multiplicity of experience" (Iser 16). As experience is the only ground upon which any claim to knowledge can be proclaimed, Pater rejects all dogmatisms that posit the existence of any such thing as fixed and rigid. Yet his call for skepticism—intended, as Wolfgang Iser specifies, "in the old classical sense of 'spying out, investigating, searching, examining'" (16)—is not an invitation to renounce the hopeful venture for epistemological reality; instead, it is a warning not to neglect the many forces at play around us,

> It is the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of internal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change—and bids us, by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis, to make what we can of these. To the intellect, the critical spirit, just these subtleties of effect are more precious than anything else. What is lost in precision of form is gained in intricacy of expression. It is no vague scholastic abstraction that will satisfy the speculative instinct in our modern minds. Who would change the colour or curve of a rose-leaf for … that colourless, formless, intangible being—Plato put so high? For the true illustrations of the speculative temper is not the Hindoo mystic, lost to sense, understanding, individuality, but one such as Goethe, to whom every moment of life brought its contribution of experimental, individual knowledge; by whom no touch of the world of form, colour, and passion was disregarded. (Pater, *Appreciations* 68)

It is worth delineating a few concepts that arise from these words. Firstly, knowledge is impression individualized; secondly, it is susceptible to influences around us in as much as the changing patterns of associations alter our perception; lastly, no knowledge can be fixed since the observer

is always changing. It then follows that the only coherent way to perceive man's mind is through the Lockean image of the tabula rasa[2]. The task of man is that of allowing for more experience to reach him so that he can ultimately learn to appreciate the choicer forms – "points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us" (Pater, *The Renaissance* 189). Amidst the flux of things there are some things which ought to be immortalised, because it is out of the appreciation of them that we might arrest for a moment the burdensome awareness of our own finiteness. Here is Pater at his most compelling:

> Well! We are all condamnés, as Victor Hugo says: we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve … we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among "the children of this world"; in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. (189)

Art and song, the ultimate forms of beauty, are then inevitably linked with time and gain their special status as distillations of a unique set of circumstances offered by experience. Thus, beauty is not to be categorized in broad terms; rather, it must be recognized and appraised in its own peculiar appearance—"Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaningful and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics" (xix).

Beauty ceases to be representative of anything other than itself; if, for Hegel, beauty was the embodiment of the idea sublimating physical reality, and for Ruskin, it served to vivify God's qualities in the world, for Pater beauty exists "only as a particular form of appearance" (Iser 63). Out of the relative stems the individual, for it is in the rendition of personal impression that beauty arises,

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2   In particular I am referring to "Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience:* in that, all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either about *external sensible objects; or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that, which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking.* These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring" (Locke 109).

> The transcript of his sense of fact rather than the fact, as being preferable, pleasanter, more beautiful to the writer himself. In literature, as in every other product of human skill … wherever this sense asserts itself, wherever the producer so modifies his work as, over and above its primary use or intention, to make it pleasing (to himself, of course, in the first instance), there 'fine as opposed to merely serviceable art, exists. Literary art, that is, like all art which is any way imitative or reproductive of fact—form, or colour, or incident—is the representation of such a fact as connected with a soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power. (Pater, *Appreciations* 10)

The artist's responsibility is not dissimilar to that of the critic; both have to infuse the raw, factual material of experience with their own peculiar sense of it, to work on it alchemically in order to alter it and color it with their perception.

If beauty is the result of the relative, therefore individual, imprinting of the artist's self onto the multifarious reality that surrounds them, it follows that a peculiar trait ascribable to that artist must be recognizable. Pater found that particular feature in style. Ian Fletcher affirms that Pater construed style "as a mode of perception, a total responsive gesture of the whole personality" (39). Aptly enough, Pater informs us that the painstaking work of the artist in search of the right word—le mot juste—must be carried out "with his peculiar sense of the world ever in view, in search of an instrument for the adequate expression of that", so that he can beget "a vocabulary faithful to the coloring of his own spirit, and in the strictest sense original" (*Appreciations* 15). The interplay between inward perception and outward perceptibility is given concrete form by the artist's expression, so that style becomes for Pater an appropriate site to track individuality. Hence by attentively selecting the minutest part according to his own imaginative sense of it, the artist does not properly create reality as much as he reshapes it according to his own taste. Wolfgang Iser argues that Pater tried to find the legitimation of a similar idea of beauty in history, more specifically in the transmutation of narrative concepts of "classicism" and "romanticism" into historical ones, out of which interplay comes art—classicism embodies a manner of writing striving toward indefinable perfection, whereas romanticism represents the avant-garde movement that looks forward to a future which will, in turn, render it classical in form. The main step of the process is that of self-curtailment—"there are the born romanticists, who start with an original, untried matter, still in fusion; who conceive this vividly, and hold by it as the essence of their work; who, by the very vividness and heat of their conception, purge away, sooner or later, all that is not organically appropriate to it, till the whole effect adjusts itself in clear, orderly, proportionate form; which form, after a very little time, becomes classical in its turn" (257–258).

The crucial word here is 'original.' In fact, as Pater's scepticism prevents any kind of a priori definition of beauty, its appearance in a world of phenomenality is signalled by a deviation from its surroundings, thus betraying the lingering presence of the grotesque—"With a passionate care for beauty, the romantic spirit refuses to have it, unless the condition of strangeness be first

fulfilled. Its desire for a beauty born of unlikely elements, by a profound alchemy, by a difficult initiation, by the charm which wrings it even out of terrible things; and a trace of distortion, of the grotesque, may perhaps linger, as an additional element of expression, about its ultimate grace" (247–248).

One feels compelled to wonder what sort of pleasure the appraisal of such beauty could convey. As often happens with Pater, some of the issues emerging from his critical writings are addressed, however tentatively, in his fiction.

3. *The Short Story*

Enter now *The Child in the House*, succinctly deemed by Harold Bloom as "the largest clue to his [Pater's] work, criticism and imaginary portraits alike" (15). The story in itself is pretty straightforward, as the reader is presented with the reminiscence of Florian Deleal's early years spent in his childhood home. As a "reward" for assisting an old man in the street, he chances to hear the name of the place where he grew up, and so he begins a recollection of his childhood home. At first recollected in a dream, which presents the object of memory to mind "raised a little above itself, and above ordinary retrospect," his life in his old red-brick house appears to have been primarily an education in aesthetic sentiment; the young boy sat daily at the window absorbing the scent of the golden-rod outside (Pater, *Miscellaneous* 172).

Nevertheless, above the house, positioned near a great city, would often arrive some banks of rolling cloud and smoke, which Florian did not actually hate—a child's sense of beauty, the narrator tells us, is not dependent on any fineness surrounding them, because earlier in life "we see inwardly" (175). This is a cardinal concept for Pater: grasping beauty implies a transformation of the perceived object by the inward vision, capable of preserving it long after its appearance to the senses—"How insignificant, at the moment, seem the influences of the sensible things which are tossed and fall and lie about us, so, or so, in the environment of early childhood. How indelibly, as we afterwards discover, they affect us" (177). The tranquility of his old home has led him to a preference for the "comeliness and dignity, an urbanity literally, in modes of life, which he connected with the pale people of towns, and which made him susceptible to a kind of exquisite satisfaction in the trimness and well-considered grace of certain things and persons he afterwards met with" (176-177). Therefore, a sort of dialectic seems to be at play, where the outward stimuli impact heavily on the inward sensations which in turn determine the privileging of choicer forms in the outside world. Man's mind being a white paper upon which experience must inscribe its drawings, its own identity is indelibly affected by it to the point of dependence. At this point, perhaps quite surprisingly, one is asked to ponder on the implications that derive from Florian's education. While it could be expected that the predilection for outward forms may merely result in a perennial longing for innocuous prettiness, it turns out that the submission to the sensuousness without comes at its cost, since Florian sees enhanced, by his perceptibility, the awareness that in the "visible, tangible, audible loveliness of things" lies "a very real and somewhat tyrannous element," first and foremost caused by the recognition of living beings

in sorrow, and ultimately augmented by the dreadful finiteness of all things (181). One is then called back to the "profound alchemy" and "difficult initiation" Pater mentioned in the "Post-script" of *Appreciations,* which are enacted here in *The Child in the House*. What emerges is that the crucial practice of 'grasping beauty' ought to be conceived as the sustained effort to cope with the intrinsic melancholy that is generated by a refining of the perceptive powers.

4. *Assessing difficult beauty: Pater, Swinburne, Baudelaire*

"The bitterness of pleasure" is perfectly captured by Catherine Maxwell in her essay *Swinburne, Pater, and the Cult of Strange Beauty,* where she affirms that "Pater echoes Swinburne's interest in complex types of beauty with a mixed emotional charge. He will subsequently identify such amalgams as characterizing 'romanticism', but this disturbing 'strange' or 'curious beauty' that absorbs and mesmerizes the gaze and engenders fascination will pervade later decadent literature and art" (10).

While it is perfectly true that a fascination with "curious beauty" will prove widely influential for the successive generations of decadents, it is also correct to remark (as Maxwell readily does) that the mutual suggestiveness active between Pater and Swinburne is largely dependent on Charles Baudelaire's influence on both. Indeed, the first English review of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* appears in *The Spectator* in 1862 and is written by Swinburne himself, and it is almost certain that Pater must have got his hands on it[3]. Maxwell also highlights the influence of Swinburne's *Ave atque Vale* on Pater's *Poems by William Morris* and persuasively connects the "gardener of strange flowers" as it appears in the former to the "strange flowers" in the latter.

Not only do I accept Maxwell's suggestion to connect Swinburne and Pater's fascination with strange beauty to Baudelaire, but I would also propose to expand it to a Bourdieusian extent to argue that their usage of the French poet is also to be understood as a means to fashion their trajectory in the British literary field[4]. If, as Patricia Clements argues, "the two … are Baudelaire's earliest English appreciators, and their two quite different styles of appre-ciation were equally consequential," it is also logical to presume that in their maneuvers lies, however latently, the intention to position themselves in continuity with (part of) the poetical

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3 To learn more on the interplay between Pater's and Swinburne's essays in the 1860s, see Morgan, Thaïs E. "Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1993, pp. 315–32.

4 Rodney Benson successfully sums up the concept of 'field' as such—"Drawing on and modifying Weber's sociology of religion, Bourdieu sees society as differentiated into a number of semi-autonomous fields (e.g., fields of politics, economics, religion, cultural production, etc.) governed by their own 'rules of the game' and offering their own particular economy of exchange and reward, yet whose basic oppositions and general structures parallel each other" (464). I argue that to regard the British literary market of the later decades of the 19th century as a field struggling for autonomy could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the transnational dynamics between French and British 'aesthetic' texts. See Benson, Rodney. "Field Theory in Comparative Context: A New Paradigm for Media Studies." *Theory and Society,* vol. 28, no. 3, 1999, pp. 463–98. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108557.

creeds of Baudelaire (29). In this reasoning, I am indebted to Carlo Martinez and his article '*Le più pure regole dell'Arte:' Poe, Baudelaire e la genesi transnazionale del campo letterario*, where he convincingly demonstrates that Baudelaire's discovery and translations of Poe are not only motivated by exclusively aesthetic reasons, but also by his desire to subvert the orthodoxies of the Parisian literary market. In fact, as Martinez argues, by introducing the American writer to the French public Baudelaire also aimed at appropriating some of his American colleague's stances and strategic maneuvers. Sharing Martinez's wish to emphasize the broader roster of literary agents at play in the literary field, I propose that Swinburne's and Pater's contrasting references to Baudelaire ought to be remarked on so as to reach a better understanding of their oeuvre. Let us consider this extract from Baudelaire's *Mon cœur mis à nu:*

> J'ai trouvé la définition du Beau, de mon Beau. — C'est quelque chose d'ardent et de triste, quelque chose d'un peu vague, laissant carrière à la conjecture. … Une tête séduisante et belle, une tête de femme, veux-je dire, c'est une tête qui fait rêver à la fois, — mais d'une manière confuse, — de volupté et de tristesse ; qui comporte une idée de mélancolie, de lassitude, même de satiété, — soit une idée contraire, c'est-à-dire une ardeur, un désir de vivre, associés avec une amertume refluante, comme venant de privation ou de désespérance. Le mystère, le regret sont aussi des caractères du Beau.[5] (79)

And compare it with *The Child in the House*;

> Also then, for the first time, he seemed to experience a passionateness in his relation to fair outward objects, an inexplicable excitement in their presence, which disturbed him, and from which he half longed to be free. A touch of regret or desire mingled all night with the remembered presence of the red flowers, and their perfume in the darkness about him; and the longing for some undivined, entire possession of them was the beginning of a revelation to him, growing ever clearer, with the coming of the gracious summer guise of fields and trees and persons in each succeeding year, of a certain, at times seemingly exclusive, predominance in his interests, of beautiful physical things, a kind of tyranny of the senses over him. (Pater, *Miscellaneous* 178)

The similarities between the two passages are luminously evident. I propose that any reference should serve to affirm the practice of grasping beauty as an autonomous pursuit—one which embraces the intricate balance of wonder and melancholy. In particular, the tyranny of the

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5   "I have found the definition of Beauty, of my Beauty—It is something ardent and sad, something a bit vague, which allows for speculation … A beautiful and seductive face, a woman's face, I mean, is a face that spurs simultaneously— though in a confused manner — dreams of voluptuousness and sadness; which involves an idea of melancholy, of weariness, even of satiety,—either a contrary idea, that is to say an ardor, a desire to live, associated with an ebbing bitterness, as if coming from privation or despair. Mystery, regret are also characteristic of Beauty" (Baudelaire 79, my trans.).

senses may be viewed as a source of power by which one could less reluctantly abide, compared to the laws that govern society as such. As Bourdieu affirms,

> Rather than a ready-made position which only has to be taken up, like those founded in the very logic of social functioning, through the social functions they fulfil or lay claim to, 'art for art's sake' is a position to be made, devoid of any equivalent in the field of power and which might not or wasn't necessarily supposed to exist. Even though it is inscribed in a potential state in the very space of positions already in existence, and even though certain of the Romantic poets had already foreshadowed the need for it, those who would take up that position cannot make it exist except by making the field in which a place could be found for it, that is, by revolutionizing an art world that excludes it, in fact and in law. They must therefore Invent, against established positions and their occupants. (76)

For this reason, it is arguable that Baudelaire's influence is not uniquely that of 'the gardener of strange flowers,' but also of the nomothete of the autonomy of art.

What Pater masterfully adds to an appraisal of beauty which at once exalts and subjugates is the formulation of an aesthetically-grounded empathy traceable in "a sympathetic link between himself and actual feeling, living objects … fastening those who suffered in anywise to his affections by a kind of sensible attachments" (*Miscellaneous* 187). William E. Buckler's fine intuition that a link between aesthetic perception and empathy represented an enduring concern for Pater is wholly convincing—"The specific passage out of which *The Child in the House* grew occurs just two-thirds of the way through the essay originally entitled 'Romanticism' and reads, in briefest part, as follows: 'The habit of noting and distinguishing one's own most intimate passages of sentiment makes one sympathetic, begetting, as it must, the power of entering, by all sorts of finer ways, into the intimate recesses of other minds'" (283). If one is persuaded that, as I have tried to suggest, the strange beauty as depicted in the short story functions as a means to substantiate the autonomy of perception through a complex, multifaceted characterisation of sensorial stimuli, it still remains necessary to explain how the effect is ultimately brought about through form.

5. *The Oneiric Quality of the Tale*

One of the finest features of *The Child in the House* is the veil of half-reality that permeates the text as a whole; what is even more remarkable is that the entrance into a similar realm is granted as a 'reward' for an act of kindness performed at the very beginning by Florian. As has already been stated, Florian chances to hear the name of the place where he grew up while helping an older man, and the sound of the name itself spurs him to embark, that night, on a dreamy recollection of his childhood abode. Immediately, the text delineates a connection between piteousness and aesthetic apprehension—Florian's dream serves him wonderfully because it did for him "the office of the finer sort of memory, bringing its object to mind with a great

clearness, yet, as sometimes happens in dreams, raised a little above itself, and above ordinary retrospect" (Pater, *Miscellaneous* 172).

The fact that this awarded élan of enhanced perception is enacted in an oneiric state is by and large associable with Bachelard's famous statement in *The Poetics of Reverie* that "reverie is not a mind vacuum. It is rather the gift of an hour which knows the plenitude of the soul" (64). What 'the gift of an hour' brings Florian is a renewed encouragement to begin an old design of his, namely the noting of "some things in the story of his spirit" (64). At this juncture we must suppose that all further information in the text, such as "the staircase with carved balusters and shadowy angles," or "the curtains, the couches, the paint on the walls with which the light and shadow played so delicately," is recollected by him as "he fell to thinking of himself therein, and how his thoughts had grown up to him" (Pater, *Miscellaneous* 172–174). As readers, we are then gifted with the protagonist's coloured remembrances of his time in the house, and it is important to keep in mind precisely this act of distancing between the time of narration and that of the action narrated. The great design of this short story is not just its portrayal of childhood experiences; rather, it purports to investigate the role of said instances in the development of the Paterian 'imaginative sense of fact[6].' It is again fruitful to turn to Bachelard—"The recalled past is not simply a past of perception. Already, since one remembers, the past is designated in reverie as a value of image. Imagination colors from the very beginning the pictures it likes to review. To return to the archives of memory, one must go beyond facts to regain values.... Reveries are Impressionist paintings of our past" (qtd. in Kaplan 22). As Edward K. Kaplan argues, according to the French philosopher, "the imaginative coloration of a remembered value is especially creative because the union of memory and reverie restores the ideal aspect of these first impressions" (22). What Florian's ideal first impressions amount to is the development in him of a distinctly Paterian characterisation of sensibility—"Sensibility—the desire of physical beauty—a strange biblical awe, which made any reference to the unseen act on him like solemn music" (Pater, *Miscellaneous* 195). No scholar of Pater could fail to perceive the ring of these words in the author's corpus, but then it is also remarkable that they were composed in a work of fiction that, as Buckler maintains, reads "as self-verifying myth" (282). It is then reasonable to suppose that in such self-verifying myth the ultimate purpose is that of legitimising the all-compassing breadth of aesthetic apprehension, since, to put it like Bachelard,

> thanks to the shadows, the intermediary region which separates man and the world is a full region, and a plenitude of light density. That intermediary zone softens the dialectic of being and non-being. Imagination does not know nonbeing. … The man of reverie lives by his reverie in a world homogeneous with his being, with his half-being. He is always in the space of a volume. Truly occupying all the volume of his space, the man of reverie is everywhere in his world, in an inside

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6   It should also be mentioned that this phrase is famously the title of Philipp Dodd's collection of essays on Pater. See Dodd, Philip. *Walter Pater: An Imaginative Sense of Fact.* Frank Cass, 1981.

that has no outside. It is not for nothing that it is commonly said that the dreamer is plunged in his reverie. … The world is no longer opposed to the world. In reverie, there is no more not-I. In reverie, the not no longer functions: all is welcome. (qtd. in Kaplan 23)

Pater's peculiar achievement here is to have assimilated sensorial perception to self-knowledge, to have offered his readers an arsenal of skeptical hyper-sensibility from which stems the question—"Was it some periodic moment in the expansion of soul within him, or mere trick of heat in the heavily-laden summer air?" (Pater, *Miscellaneous* 178).

6. Conclusion

Aiming to direct critical attention at the peculiar features of beauty as expressed in *The Child in the House*, it has been suggested that the Paterian notion of beauty as wrought out by "difficult initiation" and "profound alchemy" can be accounted for in a more complex and nuanced manner. Firstly, the importance to Pater's thought of relative and therefore individualised renditions of personal impressions has been recorded, with a particular focus on the addition of strangeness to beauty. Then, the short story is explored to note how the submissiveness to outward physical forms is joined by a more enhanced perception of their finiteness, with the inevitable addition of melancholy; it has later been argued that a similar conception of beauty may also have been influenced by the works of Charles Baudelaire and, making use of Bourdieusian terminology, I have contended that Pater's (like Swinburne's) references to Baudelaire may be understood as his desire to follow his trajectory as a representative of autonomous art. Some notions by Bachelard's *Poetics of Reverie* have also been brought to the fore to suggest that Walter Pater utilised the narrative technique of imaginative recollection in order to substantiate the far-reaching breadth of aesthetic apprehension.

I have ventured to persuade that the strangeness of Paterian beauty does not merely denote openness of mind; it also signifies the conscious effort to consecrate aesthetic sensibility as a complex, multifarious experience that claims completeness in itself.

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Transmogrifying Thomas Mann's Works in Times of Crisis: Colm Tóibín's *The Magician*

Abstract. *The Magician* (2021) is Colm Tóibín's latest novel and his third biofictional text after *The Master* (2004) and *The Testament of Mary* (2013). To address the complexity of the biographical novel as a liminal genre, this article makes use of transmogrification, a portmanteau of transfiguration and modification that refers to the act or process of something or someone being transformed into a different form. *The Magician* (like *The Master* and *The Testament of Mary* before) recalls the life of a historical figure, Thomas Mann in this case. In the process of fictionalizing the flesh-and-blood literary icon, the novel transmogrifies the real human being. For detractors of biofiction, this is ethically questionable. However, for those in favour of the genre, novels like *The Magician* fictionalize historical figures as exceptional and symbolic and, hence, provide a way to understand both their times and the present. Many biofictional texts explore the lives of literary icons. In this sense, this essay delves into the process whereby Mann transmogrified (his) life into fiction. Moreover, it also argues for the significance of this process and Mann's own singularity that explain both the first half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.
Keywords: Biofiction, transmogrification, Tóibín, Mann, duality, early-twenty-first-century crisis

1. Introduction

Transmogrification is a portmanteau of transfiguration and modification, and refers to the act or process of something or someone being transformed into a different form. It has to do with religious, miraculous and magic events. In other words, it is a liminal experience shifting from an ordinary status to a new one. It is connected with transitionality, a sense of change and crisis characteristic of the fascisms of the early decades of the twentieth century coming back with current populism. This concept of transmogrification has been very common in mythic and fantastic literature, as well as in fairy tales and religious texts, because they conjure up the magical, the uncanny and the spiritual. Indeed, the transformative event is often regarded as a solution to a primordial problem. In this article, special focus is put on metaphorical transmogrification,

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as is the case of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphoses* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Samsa's transformation into a monstrous vermin and the Faustian alteration of Dorian's portrait are metaphors for a world in crisis and change. In fact, transformations transcend the characters and address social, political and cultural anxieties and revolutions. At the turn of the new millennium, the hybridity, liminality, and transformative chances of identity are features of an increasingly popular genre, namely biofiction or the biographical novel. For Lackey, it "fictionalizes the life of a real person in order to give readers the author's vision of life and the world" (*Biofiction* 141). David Lodge has also explored the way biofiction works both as a writer and as a critic. The genre, he argues, "takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography" (8). Biographical novels thus transmogrify "actual" life into a different narrative and ontological level, the biofictional. In other words, the biofictional inhabits a hybrid territory, especially because it captures a real event or person and grants them a new aesthetic dimension. In switching between reality and fiction, the truthfulness of the real person is not downgraded when it is fictionalized, but granted a new sense of what is real(ness). Hence, Joanna Scott's words on *Arrogance,* her biographical novel on Egon Schiele, are meaningful—"I was not trying to pretend that my Schiele was the real Schiele. I just wanted him to be real" (32). The biographical novel has been particularly fashionable since the nineteen nineties and has very often focused on writers (Layne 1). In fact, both biofiction and the biopic have delved into writers' lives, which, as Buchanan argues, "is surprising, given that 'literary composition' is 'profoundly uncinematic as a subject of cinematographic attention'" (4). However, for Buchanan, it is precisely writers' exceptionality that attracts a contemporary readership (5). This singularity of the writer in the era of mass reproduction is related to Benjamin's aura, which will be taken up later.

Colm Tóibín's *The Magician* is a biographical novel covering seven decades of Thomas Mann's life. It is not Tóibín's first biofiction, though. *The Master* and *The Testament of Mary* had already fictionalized the lives of Henry James and the Virgin Mary, respectively. In the case of *The Master*, as David Lodge points out, it came out almost simultaneously with other biographical novels on James (Lodge's *Author, Author* and Emma Tenant's *Felony*) in *The Year of Henry James*. All three novels partake of a revival of the past (particularly Victorianism) in the last decades (Kaplan; O'Gorman; Hargreaves; Heilmann and Llewellyn; Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss; Louisa Hadley). This is especially the case for nineteenth-century writers, who are revisited now and again. According to Layne, this is because of the "prevalent sense of the Victorians as the progenitors of the contemporary" (2). If Victorianism is relevant and applicable for historical and biographical novels alike, this is, as Layne points out, "even more applicable to Modernist subjects[2]," not least because of "the innovations of the self-declared 'New Biographers'" (2).

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2   Biofiction has often focused on Victorianism and only occasionally on Modernism. Thus, although this article argues there is an increasing interest in the early twentieth century, especially on account of the parallelisms with the early twenty-first century, most references on biofiction are still on neo-Victorianism.

Lytton Strachey is crucial in this shift from classic biography to modernist proto-biofiction, especially in his "subordination of factual detail to inner thoughts, as well as its tendency to present the author's, rather than the subject's vision of life" (5). In other words, the historical figure is transmogrified into a character that helps the author and readership to come to terms with current anxieties irrespective of factual accuracy. This is a point many critics do not consider or simply overlook. In his review of *The Magician*, Anthony Cummins points out:

> When we read what Thomas was up to "as 1914 wore on", or that "for Thomas, the change from complacency to shock was a swift one" when he saw Hitler's support surge in 1930, it adds to a reading experience that feels uncomfortably, even pointlessly, stranded in a stylistic no man's land between biography and fiction. (Cummins)

Cummins's feel of incongruity is not exceptional. Marie-Louise Kohlke speaks of "identity theft"; Binne de Haan questions the historical inaccuracy of biofictions; and Jonathan Dee censors the ethicality of "resuscitating" real people in fiction in *The Reanimators*. As Lackey puts forward, what is at stake in this controversy is "the autonomy of art" (*Biofiction* 88). The critics of the genre take for granted that art, in this case fiction, is a subordinate narrative to truth-relying discourses like historiography—"The issue here is one of disciplinary primacy. Is art subordinate to history, sociology, and/or morality? In other words, are the truths of history, sociology, and/or morality axioms that the artist must accept as conceptual starting points?" (88). Since the Enlightenment, historiography has assumed a scientific discourse to detect and understand historical events and hence predict what is likely to happen in the future (10). For Lackey, historical fiction is a consequence of this scientific conception of history, whereas biofiction breaks with this determinism (12). *The Magician* belongs to this second group, merging different ontologies on the same level and modelling them according to fictional discourses and interests. Moreover, the novel partakes of the increasing interest in the early twentieth century as a moment of crisis and change which reverberates in the early twenty-first century.

In *The Magician*, the process of transmogrification is complex. The novel transforms flesh-and-blood Thomas Mann into a character to enquire into the first half of the twentieth century in Germany first and the world later. In revising Mann's life and times, *The Magician* addresses current anxieties vicariously. Of special relevance is the tension between the historical figure, as known from biographical texts, and the character Tóibín speculates with in fictional terms. To do so, *The Magician* represents the epiphanic moments when and whereby Mann converts people, events, and perceptions into artworks. This double transmogrification process is sometimes intersectional because the limits between the writer, his biofictional persona and the creative process are problematic. This is especially the case with Mann's diaries. When they came out in 1975, they revealed his bisexuality and political views. However, *The Magician* creates a suspense when the narrator argues that, out of the many documents "he would like to have transported out of Germany, the most important set of papers, Thomas knew, were his diaries" (180). It is not only that the novel exposes Mann's privacy and intimate feelings; it works out his inner conflicts in a pushing narrative.

According to Lackey, biofiction has been particularly fertile in Irish literature and often concerned with minorities and marginalized groups (*Ireland* 11). For instance, Irish biofictional novels like Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* delve into "shifting power to the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed; inspiring the wretched of the earth to fight for individual agency and political autonomy; and imagining new and alternative possibilities for social thinking and political being" (Lackey, Biofiction 58). In this way, Lackey points out, the voiceless are granted a degree of agency they have been traditionally denied. Thomas Mann is not a priori among these groups, being an upper-class German married (i.e., "publicly straight") man. However, when his diaries revealed his interest in men, the process of the transmogrification of a historical figure into a gay character took place. Mann was much more than the "respectable" Nobel Prize winner; he had become a man full of secrets literature could dig into and transform to meet current aesthetic, ethical or political needs or interests. As happens with James in *The Master, The Magicia*n focuses on the protagonist's homosexual drives and how he sublimates them in his writing to repress them publicly. This is the agency both writers are granted in Tóibín's novels. Thus, they are constructed as liminal figures, socially and culturally respectable, but non-normative as concerns their sexual preferences. In keeping a distance from the actual Mann, the narrator can rework his intimate experiences and feelings and their transference into his writing. Thus, as a biographical novel, *The Magician* explores Mann's diaries and his literature to render a fictional Mann that converses with the historical figure and with twenty-first-century readers alike. In this way, biofiction allows Tóibín to go into new insights on Mann and his time, and to reach where historiography cannot for the sake of factual accuracy. The novelist does not pursue the scientific truth; instead, he selects epiphanic moments whereby life transmogrifies in literary pieces. With all this in mind, *The Magician* not only helps us to understand the character from a different perspective. It establishes a dialogue about the anxieties in Mann's and Tóibín's Mann's times, especially the rise of populisms one century apart. The mirroring between reality and its fictionalization produces a constant sensation of duality.

2. Life Transmogrifying into Art

2.1. Duality in Thomas Mann

Already in *The Master,* the fictional Henry James experiences life-transforming epiphanies, events where life transmutes into art. However, in this case, James's writing is related to the disastrous first night of his play *Guy Domville*, his inarticulate sexuality, and his bearing witness to Wilde's success and collapse. By contrast, *The Magician* ranges over seven decades and, therefore, an extensive view of the protagonist's life and the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, Tóibín's Mann is also transfixed by some meaningful episodes that he aesthetizes in writing. The tension between facts and their literary transformation is permanent and ambivalent.

The imagery of modification (i.e., the same but with a difference) in the novel is usually represented by duality. The conception of Mann's novella *The Blood of the Walsungs* is a case

in point to analyze this fascination with doubleness in *The Magician*. While Thomas attends a staging of Wagner's *Die Walküre* with his in-laws, the Pringsheims, the literary modification of so-called reality starts. The love story between the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde serves as inspiration for Mann's own infatuation with Katia and her brother Klaus. The narrator recalls their likeness, beauty and complicity, which Katia recaps when addressing Klaus—"You [enchant me], my twin, my double, my delight" (Toibin, *The Magician* 73). Drawing on Wagner's Siegmund and Sieglinde, Katia and Klaus build up a restrictive "little world" (74). Like Viola and Sebastian in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* and Julia and Sebastian in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, they, as twins, blur gender boundaries. In fact, closeted Thomas feels attracted to Katia as the doppelgänger of her brother because "she could easily be a boy" (75). This duality that the narrator detects in Wagner's opera, in Katia and in Klaus permeates their house as well. Thomas notices there is a tapestry featuring the scene of Narcissus gazing at his reflection, which leads him to imagine the severance of brother and sister: "It would be like Narcissus being separated from his own reflection" (77). In marrying Katia, the fictional Mann feels he is an intruder, not only because he splits her from her twin, but because he writes down the amputation. Conscious of his implication in the splitting, Mann fictionalizes himself not as a writer but "rather [as] some sort of government official" (77). In other words, writing is so powerful a form of modelling reality that the protagonist even avoids separating brother and sister in his fiction.

The doubleness of Katia and Klaus recalls the transmogrification of so-called reality into literature. When Mann observes his future wife and her brother, he sees "his fictions taking on life" (195). The parallelisms and dialogue are not only between reality and his writing, but within writing itself. That is to say, the literature of the fictional Mann dialogues with itself, challenging ontological levels of meaning and reality. In catching Klaus Heuser's eyes, he notices "he himself had changed in his turn, transformed into Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* and Klaus into the boy he had observed so intensely on the beach" (195). Climactic events, like Mann's meeting a Polish family in Venice, are the basis for *Death in Venice*, which the writer uses to relocate himself with respect to Heuser. Indeed, the protagonist's infatuation with Heuser is "the section of the diaries that most worried him" (184). In this way, *The Magician* highlights Mann's tormented sexuality and plays with different layers of reality. The feeling of urgency about keeping the diaries secret, which Mann recalls in his letters, grants truthfulness to the novel. Yet, it is mixed up with a sense of fantasy when recalling his love affair with Heuser, which marks a tension between the actual Mann and Tóibín's. It is precisely this tension between reality and fiction of the biographical novel that has always been problematic. Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* caused a stir because it hinted at the black revolutionary's "yearnings for a white woman … [an alleged] homosexual experience, and the emphasis on the murder of women and children during [his] insurrection" (Lackey, *Biofiction* 87). In changing details of a flesh-and-blood protagonist, the novel is not unethical with the real historical figure. Fiction has its own logic and factuality. Tóibín and Styron's novels are inspired by Mann and Turner, but the protagonists are autonomous fictional characters. When Nat Turner, the character, becomes "a multivalent symbol", namely of blackness

and queerness, Styron is not stealing Turner's identity, but creating a fictional character (93). Likewise, Tóibín's Mann is granted universality to address current relevant issues, namely sexual orientation, and intolerance. In this sense, doubling the original may constitute an ethical act because a specific case is given universal value although fiction itself does not conform to ethics.

Duality is not only between reality and fiction. It also applies to the fictional Mann because he disassociates from himself as he splits in two—"One would be himself without his talent, without his ambition, but with the same sensibility" (Tóibín, *The Magician* 334). *The Magician* plays with Mann's complex duality, which applies to German culture and human nature. His first self, "faithful" to the original, believes in German values and democracy despite the rise of Nazism. In other words, this Mann is and believes in the Apollonian (in Nietzschean terms) and cannot accept the demise of beauty, order and culture he is bearing witness to. By contrast, there is another Mann, "who did not know caution, whose imagination was as fiery and uncompromising as his sexual appetite" (334). This other side of the character is Faustian because his "talent was a result of a pact with demons" (334). This fictional self-splitting helps him to come to terms with the rise of Nazism at an individual and national level. A cultivated man, the protagonist first regards Hitler and National Socialism as marginal, not a serious threat to deep-rooted German culture. The facts eventually prove him to be terribly wrong, though. Both Mann and Germany become the stage of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In other words, *The Magician* shows how his country transmogrifies, as if magically, from (in his view) the cradle of civilization into hell after the Faustian pact between Germany and Nazism.

Despite Adorno's argument on the (un)ethicality of producing poetry after the Holocaust (Rowland 59), Tóibín's Mann goes on writing, very often to transmogrify so-called reality into an aestheticized version of it. Being split in two, the character struggles between ethics and aesthetics. That is his hard compromise with the victims of Nazism and with German cultural tradition. This duality is eventually solved when he wonders—"What would happen if these two men [his two halves] met? What energy would then emerge?" (Tóibín, *The Magician* 334). It is problematic as well as promising, an aesthetic response to an ethical challenge. He notices these two men are "shadow versions of who he was", which he cannot leave behind (334). In this sense, the protagonist represents much more than himself. In line with Lackey's conception of biofiction, Tóibín's Mann relates with the historical figure not in historiographical terms, but from the viewpoint of fiction and exceptionality. The character is a symbol that transcends a simplistic updating of the actual Mann. Instead, he represents the two sides of 1930s Germany, the civilized and the barbaric, the victim of Nazism and the one that succumbed to it. In fact, he sadly recalls, the culture he was bred in "contained the seeds of its own destruction" (335). This is especially true of romantic music, through whose "mindlessness" and "brutality" the narrator fictionalizes the tensions in Mann's Germany (335). In short, Mann is the paradigm of Germanness as a highbrow civilization, but also the victim and connoisseur of its barbaric consequences. Here is a perfect example of the transmogrification of *The Magician*, namely the unveiling of

civilization, modernity and decadence as potentially threatening and annihilating. Music is a case in point and, for that reason, one of the main referents in Tóibín's novel is *Dr Faustus*.

2.2. From *Dr Faustus to Buddenbrooks*

The protagonist of *Dr Faustus*, Adrian Leverkühn, inspired by Arnold Schönberg, is a prodigious composer who makes a Devil's bargain for success. As often happens in Tóibín's biographical novels, the author experiences an epiphany which he transforms into fiction. In other words, fiction may get inspiration from reality, but it has its own logic—"For a split second as the playing ended, he was sure that he had it, he saw the scene, his composer" (336). The muscle of Schönberg's music elates Mann, who regrets the limitations of literature to address the unfathomable (382). In his view, this is due to the attention to detail in (bio)fiction, tributary of its relationship with the scientific logic of historiography (382). Mann's epiphanies get transmogrified from life into art but, in the case of literature, they must stick to conventions of factuality and plausibility. The process of transmogrification from reality into fictional realness is particularly obvious in *Buddenbrooks* and in *Death in Venice*.

Buddenbrooks follows four generations of a wealthy German family with a special emphasis on their decline and progressive degeneration until only the mother of the family survives (54). The idea of decadence is once again the leitmotif of Mann's writing. As the narrator of *The Magician* points out, the Manns from Lübeck were to disappear while the Buddenbrooks would remain in time. Mann's novel was not exactly biofictional because he used fictional names rather than the original ones. However, Tóibín's updating of the Buddenbrooks is biofictional because the narrator recalls Mann's process of fictionalizing his family (53). Indeed, members of the Mann family in *The Magician* discuss metafictionally to what extent they identify with their fictional others. As an example, Thomas's mother boasts about her nemesis in her son's novel—"I am so musical in the book. Now, I am musical, of course, but in the book, I am much more" (56). The interaction between fiction and reality is as confusing as challenging. In fact, she intends to improve her music skills to resemble Gerda, her fictional double (56). In other words, *The Magician* plays with original and double and different ontological layers of representation to grant them a similar status and reveal the tensions of recasting real-life figures. Thus, so-called reality not only inspires fiction, but is also inspired by it.

It is again music—now one of Beethoven's quartets—that transcends the limits between reality and fiction, and elicits Thomas's aesthetic aspirations. This liminal area is tangible for him as a writer, but also elusive as if "entering into a place where spirit and substance could merge and drift apart and merge again" (333). Thomas's relation with his novels is biofictional, which is especially obvious in his interaction with the characters. He models them after real people, especially his family, friends or personalities, though he changes their names. Be that as it may, in acknowledging the flesh-and-blood persons, the fictional Mann makes ontological boundaries redundant or irrelevant in metafictional terms. Moreover, it is not only an epistemological connection that links the writer and the reality he represents, but also an affective one. Tóibín's Mann admits his growing love for his characters, Felix Krull, Adrian Leverkühn, Tony Buddenbrook and Hanno (426). Thus, *The Magician* opens a new discussion thread about the nature of life

writing. Detractors of biofiction argue that the genre is both unethical and unjustified because it delves into real people's privacy and intimacy. However, in recalling and showing affection for life-inspired characters, Tóibín's Mann is telling more about himself than he does about others. He is very explicit about this point when explaining his rapport with the protagonist of *Confessions of Felix Krull*. His making of the character is primarily a way "to harness his own experiences and self-inventions" (426) rather than exploring the accuracy and truthfulness of the facts and traits recalled. These aspects (especially the construction of reality, its reliance on epiphanic moments and the ethicality of it all) are already explored in Tóibín's previous biofiction.

In *The Master* a recurrent idea is that literature can improve life, making up for actual hardships. Being able to empathize with (firstly ill and later dead) Minny constitutes, for Tóibín's Henry James, an act of ethical responsibility with the other. In the second place, the protagonist validates the transmogrification of flesh-and-blood people into characters as a common practice among celebrated writers—"He wondered if … Hawthorne or George Eliot had written to make the dead come back to life, had worked … like a magician or an alchemist, defying fate and time … to re-create a sacred life" (Toibin, *The Master* 112). That is, James appeals to tradition for ethical support to justify his intrusion into others' intimacy; a principle that Mann also appropriates for his own benefit.

Tóibín's James and Mann recreate the lives of those around them as well as the spaces they inhabit. Of all the places that both characters/writers remake, Venice is particularly evocative, for it represents decadence like no other. In Mann's texts, decadence ranges from Hanseatic Lübeck and Nazi Germany to Venice. Through places, *The Magician* not only stages the ethical dilemmas of using real people's names and lives, but the sense of crisis of the early twentieth century, which is reverberating one century later. As usual in biographical novels, Tóibín's is especially concerned with current anxieties, which, in *The Magician,* are the rise of ultra-right ideologies, the division of the world in blocks, and the persecution and repression of minorities. It is as if the sense of an ending (of an extinguishing world) that Stephen Zweig portrayed one hundred years ago gained new meaning in the early twenty-first century.

2.3. Venice as a Recurrent Transmogrifying Motif

Tóibín's Mann's arrival in Venice is epiphanic and biofictional—"In the instant that he caught sight of the city in silhouette, he knew that this time he would write about it" (*The Magician* 95). For the main character of his novella, he first thinks of Mahler, but in the end, he considers a writer is a better choice. However, the reference to Mahler is meaningful since the central theme of Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* is the adaggietto of the composer's fifth symphony. Both Mann's novella and Visconti's film recall the infatuation of a mature writer with a Polish adolescent, an episode which, according to Mann's diaries, occurred and *The Magician* re-enacts. The sense of an ending is implicit in the boy's unreachability (more a Platonic idea than an actual human being) but also in the scenario. Venice is decadent, almost unreal, and unbreathable for the protagonist. As in Mann's novella, in Tóibín's Mann's experience, the sirocco announces disease and a tragic end. However, in this case, the process of transmogrification of life into

beauty, desire and death is reproduced thoroughly. It is not important, the narrator points out, if the protagonist is himself, his brother or Mahler (99). It is the realness of fiction that helps us to understand reality. Drawing on Goethe's infatuation with a young woman, Mann first thinks about a girl as the protagonist's object of attraction (99). However, he finally chooses a boy to grant the story a feel of impossibility and inarticulacy (100). His actual trip to Venice, thus, transmogrifies into a novella. The moment he learns there is cholera in Southern Italy, he incorporates it into the novella because Aschenbach's desire evokes disease and vice versa. Moreover, the successive epiphanic moments of the trip feed the story, especially those when Aschenbach is transfixed while looking at and being looked back at by the Polish boy. The bidirectionality between so-called reality and (bio)fiction is rendered metaphorically in an elusive scenario.

There are two ideas, namely extinction and lucidity, which characterize Mann's *Death in Venice*, especially its closure. The effect of the sirocco and the spread of cholera affect Aschenbach's health. Yet, he is infatuated with Tadzio and an overpowering death drive to remain in Venice. The last scene of the novel is crepuscular, revealing the end of the summer—"An air of autumn, of things past their prime, seemed to lie over the pleasure spot which had once been so alive with colour and was now almost abandoned. The sand was no longer kept clean. A camera, seemingly without an owner, stood on its tripod by the edge of the sea; and a black cloth thrown over it was flapping noisily in the wind" (Mann). There are signs announcing Aschenbach's death after a last hectic summer. This sense of an ending is contradictory, though, for the camera on the beach is a sign of modernity. The scene signals the transition of Aschenbach's old-school art to a new world devoid of Walter Benjamin's aura. For Benjamin, even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element—"Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership." In this process of de-authentication of art, where uniqueness is replaced by mass reproduction, photography is crucial. Therefore, it is not by chance that while Aschenbach is experiencing the aura of a unique experience, there is a camera nearby. Although it is without an owner, the camera stands for Benjamin's "exhibition value" rather than classic art "cult value". In other words, the novella shows very graphically the transition between the ritualistic art of Aschenbach, unique and aureatic, to the new mass production art of photography—namely, the world that vanishes and the one that thrives.

The narrator highlights Tadzio's loneliness at the beach as if a work of art Aschenbach admires before dying. All the teenager's movements are ritualistic in the watcher's eye "as though at some recollection, some impulse, with one hand on his hip he turned the upper part of his body in a beautiful twist which began from the base—and he looked over his shoulder towards the shore" (Mann). The scene recalls a primordial stage, which Visconti's film evokes in a masterly way. In the sunset of the day and the twilight of Aschenbach's life and career, the boy gets into the water in symbolic terms, a rebirth of the writer's inspiration.

Tadzio's sea scene is the preamble to Aschenbach's actual death, which is a symbolic event, "the price of maintaining civilization" (Dollimore 280). However, this is just a mirage because Aschenbach cannot come up with the Dionysian. "The impossibility of an equilibrium" between civilization and desire and the barbaric applies to Mann's *Death in Venice* and Tóibín's Mann's *Death in Venice* (282). Aschenbach's Platonism collapses and he eventually surrenders to "the Freudian narrative of desublimated perversion [which] unites with the pathological narrative of the degenerate, the decadent and the primitive" (291). In *The Magician*, Mann does not collapse, at least as a public figure. The novel recalls the "actual" moment when Mann surrenders to Tadzio's beauty, as appears in his diaries, and transmogrifies into a climactic moment in *Death in Venice*: "And he had no defences against the vision of overpowering beauty that appeared before him in a blue-and-white bathing suit every morning under the brilliant Adriatic light. The boy's very outline against the horizon captivated him" (Tóibín, *The Magician* 101). Tóibín's Mann gets transfixed, though he is not the protagonist of a moral fable, as Aschenbach was, according to the actual Mann (Dollimore 283). In any case, *The Magician* works out Mann's persona, underscoring the conflict between his biographical data and his fiction.

Despite the many similarities with Aschenbach, Tóibín's Mann manages to sublimate through art his repressed homosexuality and the collapse of the world he grew up in with the rise of Nazism and WWII. In other words, Tóibín's protagonist sublimates his homosexuality in novels that explore the overall decay of German culture, economy and society. The sense of crisis the character recalls in *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus* explains his dilemma, namely the devastating consequences of German cultural supremacism and his feeling compelled to that same culture to express his identity. This early-twentieth-century crisis relates to twenty-first-century upheavals, especially as concerns an overall sense of existential angst and political uncertainty.

2.4. The Twentieth Century Revisited

The Magician recalls the birth and rise of totalitarian regimes when Nazis and Fascists insidiously moved "to the very centre of the public imagination" (168). The protagonist becomes an expatriate, a nomad around the world during the first half of the twentieth century. When he first arrives in the USA, he is acclaimed as a German cultural icon opposed to Hitler (219). However, when the war is over, it is obvious that Mann is to be "used" against Communism as the new enemy of the USA. Conscious of the new status quo, Mann notices his discourse is far "too complex to matter in this time of simple polarities" (356). In focusing on Mann's criticism of (current) discourses that oversimplify reality, the novel is aligned with many critics—Barthes's "mythologies," Eco's "Ur-fascism" and Mouffe's "agonistic pluralism" have addressed how populism uses emotionality and myths of origins for "the people" to oppose the elites. However, this process of normalization and legitimation of "the people" entails excluding "the other" as disruptive of a simplified conception of reality and society. Thus, Tóibín's Mann's claim for complexity resonates in the early twenty-first century with the rise of totalitarian populisms, the frailty of democracy and worldwide political polarization. The protagonist witnesses how

Germany suffers all three problems with the rise and fall of Hitler and the division of the world in blocks (357). The Derridean we/them rhetoric he suffers in Germany follows him to the USA. Not only that, he also witnesses his own magical transmogrification from being America's friend, because it served the country's interests against Hitler, to being allegedly a communist. In this new political context, Mann is a controversial figure in the novel again. He is an avid writer, but lukewarm when it comes to politics and ethics, which was as dangerous in the nineteen twenties as it is one century later. He is tepid not only with the rise of Nazism because, when his son Klaus dies, Thomas does not attend the funeral (396). His lack of empathy is at the heart of his artistic ego, strategic politics and inarticulate ethics. He relinquishes his family commitments whereas he accepts an invitation for a conference in Eastern Germany. In other words, Thomas Mann's loyalty remains with Germany as an idea of cultural belonging. Although *The Magician* delves into Mann's personal life, it also focuses on a polarized political climate that recalls nowadays. The American government sends an Alan Bird to persuade Mann not to visit the Eastern Zone (402). This we/them rhetoric of the American government is meaningless for him, who believes in German unity in allegorical terms. Yet, Mann's decision to challenge American orders also serves the novel to reveal the fragility of (American) democracy. When Thomas summons his freedom of movement as an American citizen, Bird reminds him Eastern Germany is not his country anymore (402). Despite political pressures, Mann still dreams of a mythic Germany and thus speaks about Weimar, Goethe and freedom in a new world (412). The novel stages Mann's inner conflict between emotional and rational pulls that tell more about general anxieties (especially the crisis of idealism) than about the protagonist.

Back in the USA, Bird's threats come true and the Manns are supposed to be communists or Nazis. The Manns' unstable and schizophrenic status recalls the case of persecuted groups like homosexuals during the Cold War and enemies in fascist regimes.[3] Almost at the end of his life, Tóibín's Mann regrets "the infantilism that had become widespread in American life" (417). The simplistic discourses reducing everything to either/or positions in the novel address once again the infantile socio-political context of the early twenty-first century. The populism of world leaders has become increasingly common as the century has advanced. Being an old man, Thomas feels he can tell the truth for the first time in his life but he understands that the truth no longer matters, that human nature is volatile and that everything is transient—all of these conclusions are aligned with current anxieties, especially post-truth, and with the concerns of biofiction (418). Recalling his jubilant arrival in the USA when he is about to leave the country, the protagonist realizes his success was ephemeral, namely a decade long (419). Once more the parallelisms

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3   During the Cold War, the paranoia against gays was harsh. They were considered either too blatant to be tolerated or too closeted to be detected, too decadent for communists and too potentially revolutionary for liberal democracies. Likewise, Eco's article "Ur-fascism" puts forward a similar schizophrenic discourse that applies to others/enemies in general—the enemies of fascist regimes are considered too powerful because of their influence on the masses, and too weak to lead the people.

with present unease are blatant. Drawing on Benjamin's aura, when everything (even literary icons) becomes mass produced and disposable, nothing remains and neo-existentialism arises. Mann's sensation of loss (420) extends beyond himself in an overall impression of crisis. Yet, he still relies on beauty, the Apollonian, and his biofictional relation between life and literature, as "his life had illustrated his work" (428). Yet, *The Magician* is a proof of the complex relation of fiction and reality, as his work also inspires life.

3. Conclusion

Revising the lives of literary icons seems culturally relevant when an overall mood of crisis pulls towards the past in search of unalterable referents. As of 2008, Lackey points out—"Wideman published a spectacular biographical novel titled *Fanon*, and on the opening page he clarifies how the life of someone like Fanon can be fictionalized and universalized to the benefit of people more generally" (*Biofiction* 118). The same applies to Tóibín's three biofictions so far. In fictional-izing Henry James, Thomas Mann and the Virgin Mary, Tóibín's texts update them with an ethical purpose. The three are sturdy cultural icons, religious or literary, but fiction re-humanizes them. The process is especially complex: when they are humanized, they are singularized and therefore characters readers can empathize and identify with. Yet, their singularity also universalizes them as unreachable cultural idols. In this way, these novels transition between Benjamin's exhibition and cult value. The ethics of depicting all three figures in fiction is thus as problematic as com-pelling. Mary is an ordinary woman in First-century Palestine, while James and Mann are two renowned (albeit closeted) authors at the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twen-tieth century. Thus, the novels visibilize and uphold the role of sexual minorities and women.

Unlike *The Testament of Mary* and *The Master*, *The Magician* follows the protagonist for de-cades, which helps to explore a complex process of transmogrification. Mann evolves from a petit bourgeois and situated intellectual from Northern Germany to a nomad and international cultural icon. As for (his concept of) Germany, it develops from a self-infatuated country with its history, traditions and culture, to a contested one after the rise of Nazism, WWII and the Holocaust. Both the man and the country transmogrify almost imperceptibly. Likewise, Mann's experiences and the facts around him transmogrify into texts which constitute the guiding thread of *The Magician*. Yet, overarching the transformation of life into art, the novel addresses the dreadful parallelisms between the past and the present, especially how what seems un-conceivable comes true. Tóibín's Mann first overlooks the threats of fascism, which is especially significant nowadays, when post-truth populism whitewashes its neo-fascist undertones and its unpredictable consequences. If the early twentieth century challenged Mann's ideas and expectations, *The Magician* hints at new threats.

Besides individualizing and universalizing Mann, the novel explores German (and by exten-sion Western) civilization as opposed to the other. In fact, the boundaries between one and the other are porous, as both Germany and the USA transmogrify: in the case of Germany, from being the cultured home of Wagner and Nietzsche to the cradle of Nazism; as for the USA, it

transitions from the land of liberty, which welcomes Mann as a political refugee, to a regime that persecutes his political independence. As a rule, biofiction singularizes and universalizes a historical figure as a symbol of a period, but also as one that transcends it. In transcending the actual life and the angst of the period the actual Mann experienced, *The Magician* tells even more about current concerns and anxieties. The crises of the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries are a reminder of the universality and singularity of a cultural icon like Mann and how fictionalizing him is useful to understand the problematic present. In view of all the above, it can be argued that the novel is an example of resistance through literature.

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Religious Celibacy, Coerced Asexuality, and Catholic Nunhood: A Comparative Study of *The Runner Stumbles and Agnes of God*

Abstract. The representations of Catholic nuns in American theatre often rely on familiar tropes, portraying them either as devout, selfless caregivers or as harsh, ruler-wielding nun teachers. However, the portrayal of sexually repressed nuns on stage, as well as the scholarly analyses of sexual repression embedded within these characters, remains significantly underexplored. The present study seeks to address this gap by critically examining these portrayals and their broader implications within the context of religious and psychological narratives. The study investigates the effects of religious celibacy and coerced asexuality among Catholic nuns as depicted in Milan Stitt's *The Runner Stumbles* (1976) and John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* (1982). This study integrates Karen Horney's psychoanalytical framework with Richard Sipe's insights on religious celibacy to explore the complexities of human sexuality. It emphasises the adverse effects of enforced sexual abstinence on individual sexual identity, as portrayed in the selected plays. The study also examines the portrayals of sanctuary molestation, the resulting trauma, and the deliberate coping strategies employed by Catholic nuns in the plays as they strive to recover from the trauma of victimization.

Keywords: Catholic nunhood, religious celibacy, sanctuary molestation, coerced sexuality, sexual repression, American theatre

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1. Introduction

Human sexuality is a complex construct shaped by social, cultural, political, and spiritual paradigms, and regulated by the frameworks of heteronormative societies. In *An Interpretation of Desire,* John Gagnon asserts that the formation, sustenance, and modulation of sexual behavior are profoundly influenced by prevailing social structures and cultural dynamics (135–146). While sexual repression affects all aspects of sexuality, its gendered dimensions are evident in the ongoing regulation of female sexuality compared to that of males (Lubertti et al. 1). Female sexual conduct is distinctly marked as more repressed, where women's sexual development is shaped by behavioural norms formulated and regulated by a patriarchal society. Religious celibates are required to consistently suppress their sexual and sensual desires, leading to the repression of their inherent sexual nature. However, the status of female religious celibates is subordinate to men, which runs deep into the history and culture of the Church. The gendered subordination embedded within institutional structures extends beyond the regulation of female sexuality to uphold patriarchal hierarchies, thereby perpetuating systemic gender inequality within religious frameworks. Richard Sipe finds that equality of the sexes can be located in the religious scriptures, but what limits women is 'sex' (*A Secret World* 29). According to him, women cannot have power as power is consolidated in sexual terms (*Sex, Priests and Power* 6). Sipe further argues that a sexually active priest is justified through a gendered lens: when a priest becomes sexually active, his actions are interpreted as affirming his humanity, while simultaneously portraying the woman involved as dangerous, vulnerable, and inherently needy (120). The sexual sins of a priest are often seen as understandable or regrettable lapses, yet they are frequently considered easily forgivable sins (130). Catholic doctrine portrays the ideal woman as silent, sexless, and subservient (*A Secret World* 30), often associating women's existence with sin and lust (50). The traditional view of women as embodiments of sin, together with the institutional emphasis on the desexualization of female religious celibates to preserve religious sanctity, perpetuates systemic subordination. This framework not only represses female sexuality but also reduces their identities to mere representations of chastity and compliance within patriarchal religious structures.

Catholic nuns, through their abstention from sexual desires and thoughts, serve as examples of institutionalised femininity, embodying the standards of ideal female celibacy. Novitiates commence their journey into nunhood by taking the sacred vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty, thereby embracing a life of discipline and devotion. Jewdokimov and Sadlon posit that within the context of Catholic theology of sexuality, the vow of chastity necessitates the renunciation of sexual activity, portraying celibates as "angelic, sexless, genderless individuals" (2). In the Catholic theological discourse, sexlessness is upheld as an ideal quality for female celibates, reflecting the Church's sexual and celibate culture, which often equates femininity with sinfulness. Sipe contends that the Church's theological framework intertwines sex, pleasure, sin, and women, creating what he describes as the "celibate/sexual system", a structure designed to exert strict control over female sexuality while upholding patriarchal authority (*Sex, Priests,*

and Power 6). This system not only mandates celibacy but also moralizes the denial of sexual desires, ensuring the nuns' complete subjugation to the Church's authority, which perpetuates guilt and spiritual repression; any deviation from the vow of chastity incurs a profound sense of guilt, as it is perceived as both a sin and a betrayal of their religious vocation. The concept of sin is the primal contrivance often employed by the "classic patriarchal" Church to suppress Catholic nuns' intrinsic sexual desires (Ebaugh 401), thus rejecting the possibilities of allonormativity, which upholds the idea that it is normal and natural that individuals experience sexual and romantic attraction (Kennon 2). *The Bible* explicitly condemns any form of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, regarding it as a grave sin and issuing clear warnings against fornication (Tob. 4:12; 1 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 5:19–21; 1 Thess. 4:3–5). According to *The Bible*, the Gospels depict Jesus as single [celibate], anticipating a kingdom of God where people "neither marry nor are given in marriage" but are instead like angels in heaven (Mark 12: 25). Augustine, who established the groundwork for Western Christian theology, posited that the unruly nature of sexual desire constituted a divine punishment for the disobedience of Adam and Eve, advocating for celibacy as the highest expression of human vocation (Carr 6). This notion of celibacy is further supported by St. Paul's exhortation that "those who marry will experience distress in the flesh" (1 Cor. 7:1) and that those who serve God should have an undivided heart.

Convents function on a shared set of beliefs, values, and practices rooted in religious principles—such as the sacraments, *The Bible*, and the lives of the saints—which guide the nuns in leading a life of devotion, service, prayer, and spiritual growth in accordance with the Church's teachings and liturgical practices (T. S. and Jose 293). Central to this pursuit is the vow of celibacy, which enables nuns to renounce sexual transgressions and devote their lives entirely to God, free from the distractions of bodily desires. Nunhood demands nuns embrace an asexual "refrigerator" womanhood, turning off their "sexual drive", detaching themselves from the material world outside (Trzebiatowska 208). Religious celibacy thus enforces a state of asexuality, wherein the nuns are coerced to suppress any forms of sexual desire and freeze their sexual behaviour. In *The Fire in the Ashes* (1995), Joan Chittister discusses the restrictive lives of nuns, asserting that their femaleness must be transcended to become spiritual males, aligning more closely with the "rational" elements of life (148). Chittister posits that,

> Asexuality, ironically enough, became the crowning measure of women held in special esteem. At the same time, they were held in special control to maintain this asexuality on the basis of spiritual premises both faulty and destructive …. women whose sexuality was controlled were especially valuable because they transcended the demands of their sex. (148)

This process of desexualization and the adoption of an asexual identity become defining qualities for nuns, a transformation that is often mandated and expected within their religious roles. The core focus of the present study centres on this enforced expectation for nuns to transcend their sexual nature through coerced asexuality and its possible repercussions. The imposition

of asexuality on Catholic nuns undermines the concept of allonormativity, thereby rejecting the diverse spectrum of sexual identity. Forcing asexuality on female religious celibates may consequently culminate in physical and psychological vulnerability. The present study examines the repercussions of religious celibacy and coerced asexuality on Catholic nuns as depicted in Milan Stitt's *The Runner Stumbles: A Play in Two Acts* (1976) and John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* (1982). Both *Agnes of God* and *The Runner Stumbles* are inspired by real-life events, exploring controversial and tragic incidents involving Roman Catholic nuns. *Agnes of God* is loosely based on the 1977 case of Sister Maureen Murphy, a 37-year-old Catholic nun from a convent in New York, accused of killing her newborn shortly after childbirth. While the prosecution alleged that Sister Maureen gave birth to a baby boy in her convent room and asphyxiated him, the defence argued that she was emotionally and physically debilitated by the trauma of childbirth and severe blood loss, rendering her incapable of committing the act. Notably, the identity of the baby's father remains undisclosed. Similarly, *The Runner Stumbles* draws from the harrowing story of Sister Mary Janina Mezek, a Polish nun in Isadore, Michigan. Sister Janina was rumoured to have had a romantic relationship with Father Andrew Beinawski. The grim discovery of her remains in a shallow grave near the parish Church followed her sudden disappearance. While Father Beinawski was initially convicted for her murder, subsequent developments revealed that his housekeeper had confessed to brutally attacking Sister Janina with a garden spade and burying her alive. Both plays delve into the complexities of faith, repression, and human frailty within the rigid confines of nunhood.

Catholic nuns hold a prominent space in contemporary American theatre; the portrayal of nuns in popular culture has become a common trope since the late twentieth century; nevertheless, the depiction of the women religious limits itself to the portrayal of either an over-religious nun or a deviant nun. The theatrical manifestation of nunhood in contemporary American theatre is an untouched field of study, and comparatively less research has been done in this area. In "The Waning of the 'Catholic Other' and Catholicism in American Life after 1965", James P. McCartin engages in analyzing *Agnes of God*; according to the author, the play reveals the themes of rape and conspiracy concealed within a convent. Within the narrative, a liberal feminist psychiatrist grapples with the disconcerting realities prevalent in a cloister, wherein elements such as rape, infanticide, conspiracy, and authoritarian oppression contribute significantly to the repressive dynamics of the convent. In John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*, the mentally disturbed nun (Sister Agnes) transcends conventional limitations and stereotypes associated with avowed women. In "Who is to Shame: Narratives of Neonaticide", Susan Ayres refrains from condemning the depiction of unsettling images such as pregnant or homicidal nuns depicted in the play. Ayres focuses on exploring the complex and contradictory motivations of women who commit neonaticide, examining how these narratives resonate with themes in *Adam Bede*, *Plain Truth*, and *Agnes of God*. This article attempts to shed light on the psychological aspects of concealed pregnancies, challenging societal anxieties surrounding teenage mothers through analysing the character of Sister Agnes. The study not only defends the portrayal of a nun committing infanticide but

also underscores the prevalence of sexual abuse within religious institutions. The relationship between the Catholic Church and theatre is dualistic in nature—the Church employs theatre to propagate its religious ideals and beliefs, while simultaneously it regards theatre with suspicion, viewing it as a potential source of counter-narratives that could challenge or undermine its authority. In "The Church, the 'Anti-Church' and Singing, Dancing Nuns", Kevin J. Wetmore explores the complex relationship between the Catholic Church and the theatre by analysing literary works that engage with both religious and anti-religious perspectives. Delineating the rich presence of women religious in the contemporary American theatre, Wetmore cites plays such as *Agnes of God*, *Doubt: A Parable*, *Late Night Catechism*, and *Nunsense* to bring forth the regressive characteristics of the church. The existing research on *The Runner Stumbles* and *Agnes of God* reveals a significant gap in scholarly exploration of sexual repression and the consequences of coercing asexuality on Catholic nuns.

In *The Runner Stumbles*, a small-town priest named Father Rivard and a young nun named Sister Rita engage in a romantic relationship; exposing the possible consequences of romantic bonds between religious celibates, the play attempts to fortify allonormativity. *Agnes of God* revolves around three intricately drawn female characters—Sister Agnes, Mother Superior, and Dr Martha Livingstone, a psychologist, with a deliberate exclusion of male characters in the play. The portrayal of Sister Agnes as a victim of sexual abuse enables the play to critique societal mechanisms that deflect accountability from the institutional structures facilitating such exploitation, even as it reinforces stereotypes surrounding the perceived sexual vulnerability of nuns. This study focuses on the characters of Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, as both exhibit profound psychological landscapes shaped by sexual repression, contrasting sharply with the male celibates and other characters portrayed in the plays. In *The Runner Stumbles*, Father Rivard, who narrates the story, is characterized as a strong yet occasionally narcissistic figure; he expresses remorse only after Sister Rita's death. The comparison between the priest and the nun within their romantic relationship underscores a gendered disparity—while the priest garners societal sympathy and forgiveness for his lapse in celibacy, the nun is violently punished and murdered for her deviation from the vow of chastity. In *Agnes of God*, Father Marshall, the sole male celibate figure, appears only in the narratives of the nuns, highlighting his symbolic absence on the stage. This absence serves as a critical commentary on the lesser consequences faced by priests for transgressing celibacy. Furthermore, the narrative hints at attempts by characters to protect the priest who may have fathered Sister Agnes's baby, further illuminating the unequal moral scrutiny faced by male and female celibates. The present study focuses on Sister Rita and Sister Agnes' sexual suppression and vulnerability, analysing their portrayal through Richard Sipe's critical perspectives on religious celibacy and Karen Horney's theories of neurotic needs. Sipe's conceptualization of the celibate/sexual system provides a critical framework for understanding the interplay between celibacy and sexual culture within the Catholic Church. He argues that this system is fundamentally dysfunctional, rooted in a flawed understanding of human sexuality. According to Sipe, the sexual behaviour of celibates serves as a symptom of this systemic

dysfunction, ultimately perpetuating the practice of enforced celibacy. In *A Secret World*, Sipe notes that while his study primarily focuses on male celibates, its findings have the potential for "universal" application across gender and cultural contexts (3). The concept of institutionally enforced celibacy forms the foundation of the present study, which examines how such enforced celibacy shapes the experiences of nun characters, ultimately functioning as a repressive mechanism that suppresses and distorts their sexual identities. Horney's concept of neurotic needs and the dynamics of repression provides a psychoanalytic lens to understand the unresolved inner conflicts experienced by the nuns. The psychological and emotional landscapes of the nun characters, as well as their intricate struggles with institutional and societal expectations, are analysed through this methodological framework. The psychological profiles of the main characters, Sister Agnes, Mother Superior, and Dr Martha Livingstone in *Agnes of God*, and Sister Rita in *The Runner Stumbles*, are constructed using Horney's theoretical constructs. Sister Agnes and Sister Rita are examined for their neurotic needs and coping mechanisms in response to feelings of inadequacy and repression. Delineating the portrayal of these nun characters in the plays, this study analyses the predicaments of Catholic nuns' expressing their sexual inhibitions. The abuse Sister Agnes endures at the hands of Father Marshall determines her mindscape, aggravating her aberrant behavioural patterns. The study examines the portrayal of sanctuary molestation and the consequent sanctuary trauma, assessing the methodical strategies and coping mechanisms adopted by the characters (nuns) in the plays to escape from the grievous experience of being a victim.

2. Religious Celibacy/Forced-Asexuality

Extensive research has been conducted on asexuality and asexuality in humans, yet the absence of sexual attraction continues to be the "minimal" definition of asexuality (Bogaert 22). Asexuality refers to a lack of sexual attraction, while celibacy suggests the presence of desire that is deliberately not acted upon (Scherrer 631). Sipe clarifies that one of the most common understandings of celibacy involves abstaining from marriage, though not necessarily from sexual activity itself (*Sex, Priests, and Power* 57). The distinction between marriage and sexual activity, as well as between celibacy (non-marriage) and chastity, generates a considerable degree of ambiguity. This ambiguity allows individuals to assert the rights and privileges associated with celibacy or non-marriage, while simultaneously engaging in a broad spectrum of sexual behaviour (58). Such imprecision blurs the boundaries between religious or moral ideals and personal sexual practices, thereby permitting sexual exploration within the framework of celibate status. Despite these distinctions, asexuality and celibacy are frequently conflated and often perceived as "politically motivated choices", both serving as frameworks for disciplining the body in specific social and religious contexts (Przybylo and Cooper 307). Since the human body is integrated with irresistible passions, desires, and emotions, celibacy is often employed as a disciplining technique to control the body; "disciplining makes bodies docile … productive, and also tractable" (Olson 4). Celibacy, according to Richard Sipe, is one's choice of a "dynamic

state" that can be vowed, involving an honest effort to abstain from "sexual gratification" in order to satisfy one's "spiritual motive" (Olson 29). Anthony Bogaert, in *Understanding Asexuality*, observes that some people can actively abstain from sex and eschew sex, but they do not necessarily lack sexual attraction (18); Bogaert brings in the example of religious celibates in Roman Catholicism. According to the *Code of Canon Law*,

> Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and are therefore bound to celibacy. Celibacy is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart, and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and their neighbor. (277.1)

Religious celibates devote themselves to the holy vow of chastity to attain sublime union with God. As per *The Bible*, an unmarried man is concerned with the affairs of the Lord and how to please Him, while a married man is preoccupied with worldly matters and how to please his wife, resulting in divided interests (1 Cor. 7:32–34). According to the religious codes, chastity is the ideal means to dissociate oneself from worldly desires, formulating one's body and soul primed for the "intimate connection" (Cheatham 86) with God, offering a "'higher way' for salvation" (Holland 66). Such religious obligations, according to Bogaert, can never be upheld forever, and celibates may not necessarily be asexual and may gradually "stray and engage in some form of sexual behaviour because their sexual attraction and inclination are so strong and overwhelm their values" (19). This desexualization, reinforced by religious and moral discourses, compels women to suppress their sexual desires and positions female sexual desires and fantasies as markers of physical and moral vulnerability, driving women to conceal their carnal impulses. In this context, Catholic nuns become potent exemplars of institutionalized womanhood, embodying the archetype of the ideal female celibate. Devoid of any outward signifiers of sexuality and embodying an asexual ideal, they represent the Church's construct of virtuous femininity, wherein celibacy and the rejection of sexual desire are exalted as the highest manifestations of spiritual purity. The vow of chastity "affords" the Catholic nuns an "asexual" identity that is often perceived as a rejection of female sexual desires (Coburn & Smith 9). The vow of celibacy demands nuns build strong asexual relationships with other members of their congregation, channelling them to find more time and energy to focus on their spirituality. The coercion of a different sexual behaviour can be a challenging and often a traumatic process for nuns as they are obliged to maintain their celibacy for the rest of their lives; their inability to express and explore their true identity results in feelings of guilt, humiliation, perplexity, and desolation.

The obligation to maintain an asexual or aromantic lifestyle can induce considerable emotional distress in celibates, which, according to Karen Horney's neurotic framework, may result in an increased desire for intimacy (116). Horney's ideas of neurotic attachment and anxiety provide significant insights for comprehending the psychological dimensions of the nun characters in the plays. Sister Agnes exhibits a profound, unfulfilled longing for emotional connection and

affection, which might have originated from her upbringing with an overprotective mother. Her increased religiosity and fervent yearning for mutual affection from God illustrate this unfulfilled desire. Her fervent rituals signify an unintentional effort to reconcile this emotional emptiness, merging spiritual love with intimate compassion. Her internalised conviction of having violated her vow of chastity, arising from the trauma of sexual abuse, intensifies her psychological distress. This conviction intensifies her worry, establishing a circular cycle in which her piety functions as both an expression of guilt and a means to pursue absolution and affection. Sister Agnes's self-identification as a victim of sexual deviance highlights the profound effects of sexual trauma within the stringent confines of her life, revealing the interplay of affection, anxiety, and religious repression in her character. Sister Agnes's act of neonaticide can be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of her attempts to escape from the guilt stemming from breaking her vow of chastity; this exemplifies the psychological predicaments she faces as she navigates her own emotional landscape while adhering to religious celibacy. Similarly, Sister Rita's devotion to her religious vocation and her adherence to the vow of chastity are juxtaposed with the emotional intricacies posed by her intimate relationship with Father Rivard. Sister Rita, when examined using Horney's neurotic need models, aligns with the model of affection, wherein the nun craves an intimate relationship with the priest, pursuing emotional closeness that contradicts her religious commitments. According to Horney, even the nonsexual manifestations, such as seeking advice, approval, or support, are expressions of "sexual needs" that have been "sublimated" (115-116). The need for romantic or physical affection can possibly be perceived as a consequence of her internal conflict between her intrinsic desires and her obligations, which compel her to occupy an asexual spectrum. These encounters illustrate the complex dynamics involved in forming intimate connections within a religious community. G. M. Manuel, in "Religious Celibacy from the Celibate's Point of View", observes that intimacy plays a crucial role in the psychosexual development of celibates—the boundaries between ascetic and romantic relationships can become blurred when celibates engage in intimate interactions (292). Cherkasskaya and Rosario propose that women's sexual desire, whether in solitary or partnered contexts, can manifest as sexual affects, thoughts, fantasies, acts, or bodily sensations; these experiences may occur either simultaneously or sequentially (1660-1661). In the context of religious celibacy, it not only abstains female celibates from sexual intercourse but also prohibits any form of "autoeroticism", including "impure thoughts" (Doyle et al. 9). The vow of celibacy necessitates that Catholic nuns cultivate robust asexual relationships with fellow members of their congregation, thereby channelling their efforts towards dedicating additional time and energy to nurturing their spiritual endeavours. Coercing asexual behaviour on an individual who experiences a different sexual orientation can induce psychosexual repercussions in him or her. Practising religious celibacy, for those who are forced to embrace nunhood, becomes an obligatory requirement and an explicit form of coerced sexualisation.

According to Sipe, celibacy is understood as a freely chosen, dynamic state, often formalized through a vow, wherein an individual makes a sincere and ongoing effort to abstain from direct

sexual gratification; this abstinence is pursued with the intention of serving others productively, driven by a spiritual purpose (*Sex, Priests, and Power* 61). However, in the case of Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, their entry into religious life deviates from this idealized framework. Neither Sister Rita nor Sister Agnes joins the convent as a result of a divine calling. Although their decision to enter religious life may superficially appear as a choice, it was, in reality, constrained by a lack of viable alternatives. Orphaned at a young age, the convents served as shelters for them, offering the only semblance of stability and security available. Their limited exposure to the external world further restricted their understanding of opportunities beyond the convent, effectively leaving them with no meaningful choice but to embrace religious life. This absence of genuine agency in their decision underscores a critical divergence from the intended voluntary nature of celibacy. For Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, religious life is less a conscious spiritual commitment and more a circumstantial inevitability shaped by their socio-economic vulnerabilities. This context complicates the notion of celibacy as a freely chosen state by emphasising the nuanced and often coercive conditions under which women may enter religious life. After the demise of their parents, Sister Rita and Sister Agnes are raised in convents, under the care and guidance of Catholic nuns, and are thus influenced by the conventual lives of the nuns. The pervasive influence of their conventual upbringing exerts a significant impact on their cognitive processes, behavioural patterns, and ultimately, their life choices; as a result, both young women find themselves inadvertently drawn into nunhood. Chastity is fundamental to a Catholic nun's vocation; however, for "unwilling nuns", maintaining this vow can become immensely difficult (Abbot 142). This gradual immersion seeds frustration, guilt, and trauma in the nuns, as the incongruity between personal inclinations and the prescribed path of religious celibacy becomes evident. Coercing asexuality on religious celibates becomes a method of constraint imposed by religious authorities to prevent Catholic nuns from experiencing sexual pleasure; deviations from this imposed asexuality often result in expulsion from the convent and public disparagement. Breanne Fahs argues that asexuality reflects "conservative tendencies" to undermine female agency in sexuality, positioning asexual women as "prudish figures" who are excessively moralistic and devoid of sexual desire (458). The spiritual or religious elements align with rational selfhood as regulated by the social institutions such as religion, criticizing and censuring the intrinsic human desire for bodily pleasures. By denying bodily urges, forced asexuality aligns with the belief that true rationality and spiritual purity can only be attained by overcoming the corporeal needs; this traditional notion has historically been used to reinforce gender stereotypes about women's supposed inherent lack of reason. This censure creates a schism between the human mind and the human body, contradicting one's bodily performance with their instinctual thoughts and desires.

In religious traditions, celibacy is used as a technique to regulate the body, which is understood as being governed by uncontrollable passions, desires, and emotions. Within this framework, celibacy functions as a tool to enforce control over natural human impulses, compelling individuals to conform to religious ideals of bodily restraint. Religious celibacy, therefore, imposes

a form of coerced asexuality, even though asexuality is inherently biological and distinct from any external compulsion. The repression of inherent sexual desires poses a formidable challenge, particularly when living in a cloistered community of women who share a similar vocation. The act of suppressing their innate sexual impulses poses significant challenges, even for those who have embraced religious celibacy as their chosen path. Sister Agnes articulates a profound sentiment, stating that love is the second concept she contemplates after God; within the cloistered environment of her religious community, she nurtures an affection for Father Marshall and perceives his reciprocal feelings in the depths of his gaze—"when I look into his eyes I can see" (Pielmeier 16). This poignant expression illustrates the complex emotional terrain traversed by the nun, who choose religious celibacy as part of her vocation. This yearning to be loved aligns with Karen Horney's model of neurotic needs, particularly the need for affection. *The Runner Stumbles* presents a nuanced exploration of the intersection between religious celibacy and human sexuality, offering a compelling context to examine the complexities inherent in such a dichotomy. The emotional and physical intimacy between Sister Rita and Father Rivard, which exists in stark contrast to their commitments to religious vows, compels them to confront their own sexual desires. Sister Rita's existence in a convent perched atop a hill, secluded from the external world, highlights the extensive measures religious authorities take to reinforce the commitment of their members. Father Rivard's counsel to Sister Rita to keep herself busy, eschewing any thoughts of "homesickness" or "melancholy" over their renunciations, is emblematic of the overarching aim to elevate the spiritual above the material (Stitt 11). His belief that religious celibates should remain separate from the world is echoed by Mrs. Shandig, the rectory cook and housekeeper (30). The conventional notion that Catholic nuns are expected to endure a degree of solitude, believed to be the only means by which religious celibates can be "properly tested" and trained to withstand temptations and worldly distractions, paradoxically intensifies the emotional and psychological trauma associated with the suppression of their basic human needs (Abbott 99). Religious celibates may not be able to perform forced asexual behaviour as their innate sexuality cannot be repressed for a long time; asexual relationships may transform into a/romantic relationships due to the intimacy among celibates.

3. Catholic Nunhood and Sexual Vulnerability

The concept of religious celibacy elicits varying responses; some celibates perceive it as empowering and liberating, while others consider it a potential catalyst for feelings of isolation and frustration. Jewdokimov and Sadlon's empirical analysis of sexual intimacies within nunhood reveals that the boundaries of intimacy are crossed "not only by romantic feelings, kisses, tenderness, caresses, flirting, but also hugging, embracing, tempting" (2). They further argue that issues of intimacy, including the vow of chastity, extend beyond direct sexual contact to encompass a broadly defined sphere of eroticism and even everyday interpersonal relations (2). Manuel identifies intimacy as the critical determinant of the psychosexual development of celibates, noting that they have sufficient opportunities for intimate interactions within their

relationships (292). Within the specific context of Sister Rita and Father Rivard, their profound emotional bond becomes palpable through their overt physical expressions, meticulously delineated by Stitt. The nun develops romantic feelings for the priest, desiring his physical presence, indicative of a deep-seated longing for love. At this moment, the nun's sexual impulses become evident in the play; prior to this scene, there are no indications of the nun expressing such desires. This moment, therefore, marks a pivotal realization for her—despite her vocation, she acknowledges her capacity for personal needs and actively seeks to fulfil them. This evolution into a sensual and romantic relationship may be viewed as an expression of a neurotic need for affection, where the yearning for intimacy often takes the shape of sexual infatuation (Horney 115). These expressions encompass intimate acts such as kissing, maintaining close physical proximity, and engaging in embraces—"[T]hey kiss, stand, and embrace" and cannot restrain themselves from sensual pleasure (Stitt 57). These romantic expressions encompass elements of sexual instincts, which Diamond characterizes as "species-typical phenomena" shaped by both social and biological factors (173).

Nunneries are closed communities, having minimal contact with the world outside. The cultivation of a deep inner dissociation from external distractions is essential for the ultimate union with God. Morrison, Johnston and Longhurst, in their research article "Critical Geographies of Love as Spatial, Relational, and Political", state that love and space are interconnected; according to them, "love, space, and place are mutually constituted" (512). The physical setting in which Sister Rita and Father Rivard reside, the rectory located in the secluded confines of Solon, aptly referred to as the "Land of Rainbows," is a tranquil and aesthetically pleasing environment, well-suited for seclusion (Stitt 10, 22). This locale, characterized by its serenity, inadvertently creates an environment conducive to the emergence of suppressed romantic desires, thereby catalysing the sexual vulnerability experienced by the nun and the priest. Sexual desire is also seen as a response that is elicited in contexts that are facilitative of sexual desire for that particular woman (Basson 53). The contexts include a woman's situational, relational, and cultural environments, as well as her psychological state, which includes her mental health and the attitudes and frameworks she holds concerning sexuality, gender, and the body (Rosenkratz and Mark 235). The affection and closeness between the priest and the nun, coupled with the privacy and tranquillity of the rectory, influence their libidinal tendencies, triggering their sexual arousal. Similarly, the physical environment and the picturesque wheat field beyond the convent, where Sister Agnes listens to the "songs of seduction", arouse sensual feelings in her (Pielmeier 74). Sister Agnes remembers the molester as a waxy white flower and also as a bird who opens his wings and lies on top of her, implying the paramount significance and influence that nature and biblical stories of annunciation have on the nun (70, 74). The scenic farmland and the songs from the middle of the field arouse her sensuality; she stands near her window every night for a week and listens to songs anew. Sister Agnes often uses things like wax, flowers, petals, and veins to describe the molester and the process of insemination while opening up to Dr Livingstone, the court-appointed psychiatrist; the signifiers that she refers to are the only

objects that she, as a nun, is familiar with. The fragility of the metaphors employed by the nun indicates her tacit innocence and limited exposure. The nun's comparison of her surroundings to sexual stimuli suggests underlying sexual desires that she associates with the everyday objects she interacts with. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between her austere way of life and the temptations posed by the material world.

Catholic nuns do not possess rights over their sexualities and are restricted from expressing their natural sexuality, leading to heightened emotional and physical susceptibility. As previously discussed, religious celibates may eventually deviate from their vows and engage in sexual behaviour, which can lead to significant psychological consequences. This deviation from their religious vocation and the violation of their vow of chastity often result in feelings of betrayal, trauma, and deep internal conflict. Religious celibates uphold the mandatory abstinence from sex by keeping themselves away from temptations, and the constant fear of their vulnerability towards temptation overpowers them. Father Rivard is attracted to Sister Rita, but he makes a maximal effort to avoid temptation, fearing the consequent expulsion and punishment.

> PRIEST. … Then you came, with your vitality, your joy in the church, and all my enthusiasm returned. But now, people are talking about your moving in here. (*Priest takes Nun's hand.*) It's like a cloud settling on us….
>
> NUN. (*Putting other hand on Priest's which holds her.*) We don't always see it, I know, but God is just…. (*Priest withdraws hand as he realizes what has happened.*)
>
> PRIEST. This, Sister, this now, is exactly why people think nuns and priests should not be alone together.
>
> …
>
> PRIEST. This kind of informal conversation encourages what I feared would—encourages a lack of discipline. (Stitt 30)

Father Rivard experiences profound remorse over his romantic involvement with Sister Rita, whereas the nun gives importance to her emotional experiences and sensual desires, longing for his affection and challenging conventional notions of sin. Holland posits that sexual desire is a "paradigm for the general temptation to sin" and that sexual desire, once initiated, gets quelled only in the act of consummation (71). This resonates with Horney's theory that the neurotic need for emotional connection may show as sexual infatuation or an "indiscriminate" or "insatiable" desire for sexual satisfaction (33, 115). The concept of sin and the consequences of indiscipline persistently disturb Father Rivard; nevertheless, he succumbs to temptation. Cherkasskaya and Rosario posit that female sexual desire has multiple meanings as "to feel attractive, loved, and

desired" (1661); Sister Rita falls in love with the handsome and attractive Father Rivard, and proclaims that she is a "person who is a nun" and hates how the priest addresses her (Stitt 11). She says, "Like I'm a person. I am so weary of hearing Sister's rosary, Sister's book, Sister's this, Sister's that. Never just hers", making herself clear that she yearns to be treated as a woman and not as a mere nun who is devoid of sensual desires (30). According to Sipe, violating religious celibacy extirpates the "core commitment" towards asceticism and invalidates the "trust, respect, support, belief, obedience, and allegiance" that the Catholic nuns willingly exchange for what they perceive as the ultimate sacrifice for the sublime union with Christ ("Celibacy Today" 550). In addition to the trauma of sin and guilt, the fear of judgement and punishment represses sexual desires in Catholic nuns; forced asexuality leads to sexual isolation in them, intensifying the trauma of loneliness and low self-esteem.

Sister Rita repudiates the church's legal system, which is contrived by the clergy. She considers God an ordinary being; "God isn't separate…from the world…. He came to earth as a baby. He worked as a carpenter, drank wine and loved the children. We are like God" (Stitt 30). Sister Rita attempts to convince the priest that a physical union between a nun and a priest will not be judged a sin by God. She exemplifies a feminist theological religious structure that liberates "ecclesial and theological praxis" and calls for a liberated and humanized church, criticizing hierarchical Church structures (Fiorenza 612). Church authorities condemn sex, characterizing it as "dirty, sinful, unclean, and even unnatural", and for those who have never been touched by desire, virginity is their ultimate goal (Doyle et al. 5). Many nuns joined the convents without their conscious will, and exhibited a range of responses, from "meek obedience" to "bitter defiance" (Abbott 133). The deviation from religious celibacy may be viewed as a sort of resistance, wherein the celibates display an inclination towards seeking the pleasure of committing a mortal sin. The plays illustrate that the suppression of sensual impulses can give rise to feelings of abandonment and the reemergence of psychosexual urges that were previously suppressed. The nuns exhibit resentment when confronted with a repressive environment. Sister Rita exhibits a desire for protection and guidance from Father Rivard, a need that ultimately develops into a romantic bond. Sister Rita experiences mounting frustration as the priest continuously dismisses her, and she redirects this frustration into persistent questioning of the priest, reflecting her increasing agitation. Sister Rita, devastated by the avoidance of Father Rivard, bridles and screams at him. The nun, according to Mrs. Shandig, "went all crazy. She threw herself on the ground, crying and sort of rolling back and rolling back and forth" (Stitt 61). Sister Rita becomes frustrated as the priest ignores her; she becomes frustrated by the silence of the priest. Stitt vividly portrays the nun's frustration over the unreciprocated intimacy through detailed descriptions of her gestures—"Nun is frustrated by silence…fights back tears of frustration…. She begins to noisily cut a design in the brown wrapping paper…. Nun, catching a look from the Priest, tries to cut more quietly. Thereby making even more noise" (39). According to Ofra Mayseless, individuals with an avoidant partner tend to have an intense preoccupation with their romantic partners, harbouring a heightened desire for greater intimacy and reciprocity (24). In some cases, these

individuals may display hostility, aggression, or even physical violence; when faced with an objective threat of rejection, abandonment, or loss of control in relationships, this can trigger repressed feelings of anxiety and anger in them (25). Avoidance from the romantic partner, particularly within the context of religious celibacy, has the potential to generate resentment, which could possibly escalate into aggression and violence. Experiencing rejection from a partner can trigger sensual impulses, resulting in feelings of abandonment and the resurfacing of previously repressed psychosexual urges. However, the most perturbing repercussion of sexual repression is their increased susceptibility to sexual coercion and abuse.

4. Agent of God/Sexual Abuser

The history of the church's legal system and case law reveals the existence of unresolved litigation concerning sexual abuse among religious celibates. A significant issue that the Vatican tries to legislate out is the clerics' failure to follow religious celibacy, with transgressions of this vow leading to severe punitive measures for Catholic nuns (Doyle et al. 4). Sexual exploitation within religious institutions has deep and enduring effects on the victims; sexually abused Catholic nuns lose spiritual faith and develop feelings of disillusionment and alienation (Durà-Vilà 23). A vulnerable environment fuels sexual exploitation, particularly within an environment where authority is blindly trusted and obeyed; an environment of respect, trust, and austerity may open doors to sanctuary molestation. Chibnall, Wolf, and Duckro, in "A National Survey of Sexual Trauma Experiences of Catholic Nuns", assess the sanctuary trauma experiences of sexually exploited Catholic nuns in the United States. They observe that nearly one-third of Catholic nuns in the nation have experienced sexual abuse; half of these cases are perpetrated by priests who have been their spiritual directors. According to the study, a priest is likely to be the perpetrator of sex crimes against one in ten Catholic nuns during their religious lives (Chibnall et al. 158). The article details the psychological and spiritual implications that the victims exhibit:

> anger, shame or embarrassment, anxiety, confusion, depression, difficulty praying and imagining God as "father," and, in the past, difficulty working, self-blame, disruption of relationship with God, sleep disturbance, and thoughts of leaving religious life. (152)

The sexual exploitation of Catholic nuns occurs within a relationship that invokes an enormous amount of trust and admiration, making the Catholic nuns exceedingly vulnerable. Father Rivard considers it his responsibility to guide Sister Rita spiritually. He says, "[Y]our spiritual guidance, your life in Christ is my responsibility" (Stitt 24). The admiration for priests, who are considered agents of God, makes Catholic nuns susceptible to exploitation. The sexual relationship between the priest and the nun in the play is marked by affection, respect, and fear; the nun considers it an indirect relationship with God. Victims of sexual abuse exhibit emotional trauma and endure spiritual consequences that may disrupt their relationship with God, potentially leading them to consider leaving the religious order (Chibnall et al. 158). Sister Rita and Sister Agnes suffer

from emotional and sanctuary trauma, respectively, both losing faith in the God to whom they are commued. According to the portrayals in the play, the loss of faith precariously evokes in Catholic nuns the thought of betraying their religious vocation, engendering severe repercussions, leading to the loss of faith in themselves.

Maureen Sabine describes a priest as a godly figure who functions as both a protector and a punisher for the abused victim (245). Father Marshall is an "unbalanced and disturbed mix of agape and eros" who seduces Sister Agnes and persuades her for a "selfless sexual surrender", culminating in "grace and insemination" (245). The victimized nuns lead their lives bearing the psychological and spiritual wounds inflicted upon them by men they have admired and trusted. A Catholic priest is considered to be an agent of God who forgives sins at the confessional, cleansing impure minds. The sacred role of the priest not only solidifies their power within the spiritual hierarchy but also affords them an unsettling degree of control over the vulnerable, exacerbating the psychological consequences of their abuse. Through this dynamic, the abuse of trust and power becomes not only a violation of the body but also a profound spiritual betrayal. Confession makes the Catholic nuns more prone to abuse, as the priests come to know about the anxieties and weaknesses of the victim. Sipe argues that sexuality is often poorly understood among celibates, making them particularly vulnerable to misinterpretations of concepts like the nuptial covenant and Eucharistic nuptial love. This lack of understanding, Sipe observes, is evident in numerous instances where priests, while providing spiritual direction, become sexually involved with their penitents, often justifying these actions as a manifestation of God's eternal love (*Sex, Priests, and Power* 118). The confessional, traditionally a sacred space for the absolution of sins, becomes an instrument of manipulation, as priests gain intimate knowledge of the nuns' inner anxieties and weaknesses. This practice renders the nuns particularly vulnerable, as it allows the priests to exploit their confessions for predatory purposes. The molester, to whom Sister Agnes confesses every week, exploits her admiration for songs, using songs as a means to seduce her. Sister Agnes, whose exceptional ability to sing is a key part of her character, finds herself ensnared by this dynamic. Her talent, symbolic of purity and devotion, is twisted into a tool for seduction, as her musical gifts make her more susceptible to the priest's manipulative advances. Dr Livingstone finds that the molester rendered songs to manipulate and exploit Sister Agnes;

AGNES. …. And one night I heard the most beautiful voice imaginable…. I saw the moon shining down on Him. For six nights He sang to me. Songs I'd never heard. And on the seventh night. He came to my room and opened his wings and lay on top of me. And all the while he sang.

…

DOCTOR. … perhaps it was a song of seduction, and the father was … a field hand…. And the father was … hope, and love, and desire, and a belief in miracles. (Pielmeier 74–75)

Sister Agnes, characterized by her affinity for music, combined with the entrancing quality of the perpetrator's voice, renders her an easily exploitable target for his advances. McPhillips and McEwan posit that the "unequal power dynamics" can render nuns vulnerable to sexual abuse (14). Sexual coercion occurs when someone in power psychologically manipulates and exploits a vulnerable and dependent person, wielding power over their physical, sexual, or mental weaknesses; priests in both the plays exploit the victims' weaknesses to solicit them. The innocent Sister Agnes gets impregnated by Father Marshall, whom she meets once a week in the confessional room, and is forced to believe that God is the father of her child (Pielmeier 16, 18). The sexual abuse of Sister Agnes is perpetrated by a man in power in an environment that is familiar to her. She believes that bad babies come when a "fallen angel squeezes in down there", and she is ignorant about where good babies come from (19). Catholic nuns, in both the plays, are portrayed as submissive, and their innocence and ignorance are exploited by those in power, instilling guilt and shame in them.

The deranged Sister Agnes is incapable of admitting that she has given birth to a baby, and when hypnotised, she confesses that she is the worst possible kind of person who committed filicide. The ignorance and innocence of Sister Agnes serve as the rationale for concealing not only the sexual abuse perpetrated by the priest but also her pregnancy and the subsequent neonaticide that occurred within the convent. The Mother Superior repudiates the doctor's doubt that some other nun in the convent might have killed the baby to avoid scandal. She says "No one knew about Agnes's pregnancy. No one. Not even Agnes" (22). Sister Agnes, according to the Mother Superior, is mentally ill, temporarily insane, and a very disturbed young woman (27, 59). Sister Agnes is a vacillating female transitioning from puberty to reproductivity, representing the "mysterious possibility of motherhood" (Sabine 235). The ignorance of Mother Superior manifests a discernible lack of cognizance, evident in her belief that Sister Agnes's conception is a miraculous occurrence; this conviction mirrors her belief in Sister Agnes's ability to pierce her hands without a nail, underscoring her theological speculations and sheer ignorance regarding the biological nature of human beings. The fusion of the spiritual and physical realms unveils layers of symbolic significance, elucidating stark disparities between belief systems and empirical knowledge. Sister Agnes serves as a conduit for delineating profound mysteries intertwining femininity, faith, and the potentiality of motherhood. Life within the convent renders a pregnant nun physically and emotionally vulnerable, irrespective of whether the pregnancy results from rape, intimate relationships with priests, or romantic involvement with laymen.

Spiritualizing the sanctuary trauma and considering abuse as an experience that helps develop their spiritual lives are common beliefs among abused Catholic nuns. Durà-Vilà observes that when accepted as a divine/sacred sacrifice, the sanctuary trauma provides Catholic nuns with a powerful spiritual experience, allowing them to feel God's presence and reinforcing their spiritual connection with God. Catholic nuns reframe the abuse into a "religious narrative" to get themselves relieved from the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive distress they have been experiencing; they often engage and identify their experiences with the "pain and desolation"

(Durà-Vilà 26, 40) in the passion of Christ. Catholic nuns who have been abused often feel that the abuse has helped them develop spiritually, believing that the abusers were sent by God to help them grow spiritually. Nuns experience God's presence and a profound affinity to him as they spiritualize their misery and pain and view it as divinely destined, enabling them to find solace in their suffering and experience a deeper appreciation for God's mercy and love. They derive strength and solace from the belief that their suffering constitutes an offering to God, a sacrificial act performed for His glory, with the assurance of divine reward in the form of peace and eternal bliss. This situation can constitute a form of spiritual abuse, as the nuns are unable to speak out about the abuse or seek assistance due to the fear of betraying their faith or God. Sister Agnes, the young novice, has nothing else to identify with but the convent, as she lacks education, a sense of subjectivity, and life experience. She passively submits herself to the priest (an agent of God) and hurts herself physically and mentally, gradually turning out to be masochistic. Sister Agnes considers God as the father of her child and is seen harming herself throughout the play, believing that sacrifice and pain are the only ways to become closer to God. Sister Agnes' comparison of the molester with a waxy white flower implies her interpretation of sexual abuse as a holy intervention. The nun's reminiscence of the molester with open wings brings forward the image of the white liturgical vestment of the orant during holy mass, fortifying her construal of sexual abuse as a holy sacrament. The victim's belief that God is the cause of her pregnancy thus provides a spiritual veil to the rape committed by the priest; a victim considering and believing the rapist as God manifests her trauma as a divine sacrifice. The primary identity of a religious celibate is modelled on Christ as presented in the Gospels. Religious celibates emulate the life of Christ by striving to develop an intimate relationship with God (Eze et. al. 399). The abuse becomes their personal cross, giving the tragic events more significance and purpose, and giving them a sense of hope similar to Christ's resurrection following his crucifixion. Sister Agnes believes that the sexual abuse she endured has had a significant impact on her relationship with God. Sister Agnes considers her abuse a holy union and her conception divine, partly because of her deranged mindscape and partly because of her exposure only to the biblical world. A manifestation of the divine is thought to have occurred during the abuse; when a traumatic event is transformed into a spiritual experience, it turns out to have positive effects, which have the potential to change Catholic nuns' lives and solve their existential problems (Durà-Vilà 40). The "moral" and "spiritual struggles" endured by Catholic nuns may not always cope with the divine narratives of sanctuary trauma (Pargament and Exline 9). The thought of bearing an impure body can cause severe psychotic disturbances in them; the "[a]buse perpetrated by clergy creates particular vulnerability to spiritual struggles" (9). The victims suffer severe trauma when the perpetrators employ the imagery of God solely for their sexual gratification through explicit and implicit silencing strategies. The adherence to vows of obedience and chastity within the Catholic nunhood may have intensified their trauma. While these vows are assumed with the purpose of dedicating oneself as a bride of God, they can inadvertently contribute to instances of sexual abuse and perpetuate enduring patterns of sexual repression throughout one's lifetime.

5. Conclusion

Catholic nuns in the plays encounter the conflict that has plagued women religious throughout history—the dichotomy between the sexual being and the spiritual being. Through the vivid portrayals of Sister Rita and Sister Agnes, it becomes evident that the experience of sexual isolation, oppression, and powerlessness among Catholic nuns leaves them vulnerable to breaking their vows. This susceptibility manifests in numerous instances where Sister Rita and Sister Agnes defy the inherent risks, resulting in occurrences of sanctuary molestation, unwanted pregnancies, and tragic death. The most concerning aspect of sexual repression, as observed in the plays, among female religious celibates, is its potential to heighten Catholic nuns' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse. In both the plays, the nun characters are depicted often as victims of sexual abuse, as such abuse often takes place within a relationship characterized by admiration, power dynamics, and a significant degree of fear. Sanctuary trauma leads the abused Catholic nuns to lose their sense of self-worth, comfort in their religious lives, and a sense of purpose in their existence. The abuse is deliberately kept a secret owing to threats, making the victimized Catholic nuns feel powerless and guilty. However, they find the abuse more acceptable and less painful when viewed as a spiritual experience that strengthens their religious beliefs. Sister Rita displays symptoms of mental aberration when she is denied sexual intimacy with the priest, whereas Sister Agnes considers sanctuary molestation a divine manifestation, making her insanely spiritual. Through the thespian representations of religious celibacy and Catholic nunhood, both celibacy and nunhood can be perceived as a type of coerced sexual behaviour, specifically asexuality, enforced by the religious authority. In conclusion, both nuns in the plays are profoundly impacted by their sexual relationships, whether coerced or romantic, and consequently endure severe traumatic repercussions.

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Nation-building Uses of Famines in Margaret W. Brew's *Castle Cloyne* and Władysław Orkan's *Pomór*

Abstract. The article provides a comparative reading of Margaret W. Brew's *Castle Cloyne* (1885) and Władysław Orkan's *Pomór* [*Murrain*] (1910) in the light of Brian Porter-Szűcs's claim that peasant revolts that question social hierarchy are impossible to include in the nation-centered version of history. It discusses nation-building strategies and the politics of using 1840s subsistence crises as a community-founding event in two (Irish and Polish) famine novels. Special attention is paid to Brew's idea of the Great Irish Famine as a test of nationhood and Orkan's ironic approach towards interpreting the Great Galician Famine as a divine punishment for the 1846 peasant revolt against the Polish gentry. Brew's "double narrative" is analyzed to prove the universality of national suffering, aimed at identifying the Catholic landlords as famine victims alongside the tenants. *Pomór*'s narrative frame is closely examined with reference to Stanisław Pigoń's nation-centered exegesis of Orkan's writing and argued to convey disbelief in the possibility for the subservient to be included in the national community designed by and for the ruling classes. Parallel reading of female characters' famine biographies abridges the deconstruction of the myth of national unity in *Pomór* and *Castle Cloyne*.

Keywords: Margaret W. Brew, Władysław Orkan, famine literature, nationalism, people's history, peasant revolts

1. Famine Novels: Brew and Orkan

During "the hungry 1840s," two young women—Salka and Oonagh—leave their homes to save their sense of honor and struggle to survive (Vanhute et al. 15). As orphans and jilted lovers, they have no social safety net. During journeys through Galicia and Munster, they witness the expansion of famines, accompanying epidemics, their impact on peasant societies, and changes in the rural landscape caused by the potato blight. They become mothers: Salka gives birth, while Oonagh adopts an orphaned child. Eventually, both die as famine victims, though the latter reaches a more adult age. Their parallel stories are interwoven into two novelistic attempts

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at presenting the experience of a subsistence crisis as fundamental for the sense of national unity—or its lack.

Although with different conclusions, both Brew's *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne; or, Pictures of the Munster People* and Orkan's *Pomór*[2] evaluate the possibility of merging two histories—of native ruling classes and of native unprivileged groups—into a story of common national identity. Brew's narrative presents the Great Irish Famine (1845-52) as a moment of a God-designed test of nationhood for the Irish—both peasants and Catholic gentry, while Orkan's paints the Great Galician Famine (1847-48) as a God-sent punishment for lack of national solidarity.

This article shows how the potentially nation-building messages of the two novels are deconstructed by the very means meant to uphold them. A close reading of *Castle Cloyne* is provided due to the scarce recognisability of this particular Famine narrative. Orkan's *Pomór* is read outside the nation-centered frame designed by Stanisław Pigoń. Next, Brew's and Orkan's national unity projects are compared and situated in the context of Irish and Polish literatures, respectively. Finally, the text focuses on Salka and Oonagh as two realizations of the Famine biography to discuss class- and gender-related issues in literary portrayals of subsistence crises.

2. *Castle Cloyne*: "Ould Stock" Parallel Lives

Of *Castle Cloyne*'s three volumes, the second focuses on 1847—"one of the most melancholy periods in the sad annals of Ireland" (Brew 2: 159). The "dual plot" is divided into two threads following the fates of Oonagh MacDermott, a peasant woman, and a landlord, Hyacinth Dillon, of an Anglo-Norman family (Fegan 216). Oonagh becomes homeless because she cannot pay the rent to the Dillons after her father's death. Hyacinth inherits Castle Cloyne with debts accumulated by previous generations and immediately loses it in the Encumbered Estate Court. Both young people witness their families' rapid economic decline, multiple deaths of relatives and friends, suffer the disloyalty of their romantic partners who marry other people, and even lose their animal companions. The similarities are emphasized to accentuate their unity in suffering transgressing class divisions. The narrative argues that the landlords endured the same hardships as the peasants. Famine is presented in the novel as a universal calamity, destroying everyone equally:

From the rich man's field of many acres down to the little patch behind the cottier's cabin, the plague had manifested itself with terrible impartiality. After all their bright anticipations, their patient toil, their many privations, cheerfully borne in the faith of a better time to come, the Irish people found themselves, in the autumn of 1847, face to face with the gaunt spectre of the great

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2   This title is most accurately translated by the word "murrain," which channels the archaic quality of "pomór" as "epidemics" or "plague" and its strong association with infectious cattle disease. The author of this article translated all quotes from Polish.

Famine, and then one loud wail, one exceeding bitter cry of desolation and despair rose up to heaven throughout the length and breadth of the land. (Brew 2: 161)

The wail of horror slithering over the infested, rotting landscape recurs in Irish Famine literature. In *Castle Cloyne*, it is used to strengthen the impression that everyone on Irish soil was similarly affected by the potato blight, reduced to the lamenting voice. The narrator attempts to prove this by noting:

But it was not the very poor alone who suffered from the ruin caused by the blight in the potatoes, though, as a matter of course, they were the first to suffer. The farmers, and the shopkeepers, and the tradesmen, whose business was ruined for want of customers, and the great accumulation of bad debts that could never be recovered; and, lastly, the landed proprietors, whose tenants had become hopelessly insolvent, and whose lands, impoverished and untilled, were like a howling wilderness. (163)

And continues five chapters later:

And now the time had come when the hearts of men in the stately hall, as well as in the poorest cabin, were to be tried in the fiery furnace of tribulation, for the Famine reigned supreme in the land. Scarcely anyone was exempt from the terrible visitation, which percolated through all ranks and classes with more or less intensity, though, of course, it pressed hardest and heaviest on the poor. Those who had been rich now found themselves straitened, and pinched to the utmost point of endurance, and those who had been in the ranks of the poor were now reduced to a choice between two evils, the poor-house or the grave. (256–257)

Even though the narrative recognizes the differences in class-determined famine lived experience, it still argues for the universal national suffering thesis. Every exhibit of hardships survived by the peasants is accompanied by a corresponding example from the native ruling classes. This is especially visible in famine plots related to funerals and property.

Castle Cloyne is haunted by the fear of the "poor-house," which has been prevalent in literary renditions of the Great Famine since William Carleton (1794-1869). Apart from the usual horrors of over-crowded, hostile space, Brew's characters are afraid of being buried in a "poor-house" coffin or a coffin "paid for by *charity*" (2: 162, 229, 309–310, 314). It is universally believed in the novel that a funeral that the dead's family had not funded is a dishonorable one. This mindset is signaled first after Oonagh's father's death when she sells her land lease to purchase items necessary for the funeral, "I couldn't bear to think that the bones ov my good, lovin' father wor lyin' in a coffin that wasn't paid for" (1: 213). She thus explains her irrational decision to get rid of the farm. The knowledge that she managed to provide cheap but paid-for coffins for John—her unfaithful lover—and her cousin Susie "was one of very great comfort to Oonagh" (2: 314). Later

on, Oonagh buries a childhood friend, Judy, also a victim of famine, and again, the importance of spending her own money on the funeral is emphasized (3: 37). Although it is not expressed verbatim, it seems that peasant *Castle Cloyne* characters ensure dignity for their dead in class terms. By all means possible they strife to separate their loved ones from the dehumanised "poor-house" masses, reduced to numbers of buried in one common grave or even unburied, left by the roadside.

Though all Oonagh's pre-Famine friends die, she manages to bury them "decently". Surprisingly, the only character whose poor-house death is included in the narrative is a cousin of the Dillons, Terry MacNamara, whose family were

> Irish, pure and simple, without the slightest admixture of foreign blood in their veins. They were Celtic to the core, even to their very name, for Macnamara is an Irish word, meaning literally "son of the sea". From the earliest times they had been gentry in their native county, people of large property, and possessed of all the prestige that property is sure to carry with it, when it is accompanied by good birth. It would be an impossible task to trace their pedigree, for the founders of the race were lost in the mists of antiquity. (1: 232)

As a member of the native ruling class, Terry shares the lot of his tenants, which is supposed to ultimately emphasise Irish unity in famine suffering. His death is discovered by Hyacinth's sister, Grace, who fulfils a role parallel to Oonagh's and saves his dead body from a poor-house burial (105).

However, Terry's case is weak proof for social stratification's irrelevance in Famine-caused suffering. Firstly, Terry is the only poor-house resident for whose funeral the parish priest is ready to provide money and even sell his colt. When father O'Rafferty recognises Terry, he sends for his nearest relative, Grace Dillon, to ensure comfort and company. The priest and Grace agree that "He must not be buried in a pauper coffin, nor in a pauper grave … but in Quin Abbey, where all of his blood and name have been laid to rest for nearly a thousand years. Had he died rich, it would be so, and now that he has died poor, it *must* be so" (3: 104–105). Grace's demands regarding Terry's resting place contrast starkly with Oonagh's problem with Judy's grave—"I'd like greatly to have poor Judy berrid with her people, that wor ever an' always a dacent, honest ould stock, but I'm in dhread we couldn't manage that any way. Their berrin' place is too far away, an' it would take too much money to sind her there" (34). By underlining the fact that both Terry and Judy belong to the "ould stock," the narrative ensures that the difference in how they are buried is perceived in terms of class and position in power structures (inherent not only in imperial and local politics but also in the immediate social circle of Castle Cloyne parish).

It is even more evident in the case of Dominic Dillon's and Grace's funerals. Not only do they die in friendly homes where they are cared for. They are also buried in their family's ancestral resting place, a sign of status in *Castle Cloyne*'s diegesis (2: 189–190). Every surviving Castle Cloyne tenant attends Grace's funeral, and it becomes a tribute to the Dillons' prominence. Dominic

is accompanied to the graveyard by friends, family, and even his tenants, who "would not suffer the remains of their late landlord to be taken there by horses, while they, his own people, with broad shoulders and willing hands, were there ready to carry his coffin" (190). In contrast, Judy's and John and Suzie's pauper funerals—"melancholy spectacle" of "great poverty and simplicity" (2: 315)—are carried out in an "expeditious manner," and fewer than ten mourners are present each time (3: 38).

The narrator's class-based hypocrisy towards the characters is equally evident in his approach to debts and ownership, especially of land. Because of the novel's main topic, these are connected to funeral customs. The young landlord further indebts Castle Cloyne for the expenses of his father's lavish last journey, while Oonagh sells her home to clear her father's name from accusations of owing either rent or coffin money.

Similar distinctions are seen in how the loss of MacDermott's farm and Castle Cloyne estate is narrated. On the last day before becoming homeless, Oonagh sits in an empty house— an image of desolation. She faces grief after her father's death, John's rejection, abandonment from her aunt, and separation from friends who seek employment or settle far away. An unwanted marriage proposal from Pat Flanagan enlarges the mood of displacement. Oonagh refuses because she feels she does not belong in the area anymore. Her last day at home could not vary more from Dominic Dillon's:

> the servants and "followers," whose name is legion, were all standing about to see the last of the "ould master." Some were weeping silently, and all showed in the most unmistakable manner their sympathy and regret for the fallen fortunes of the house that had so long sheltered and befriended them. (2: 183)

This fragment demonstrates the narrative's continuous insistence on harmonious communion between the ruling and the ruled in pre-Famine Irish society. Many more examples of this creed can be found: the Dillons are consequently shown as the "good landlords" who only require reasonable rent, never evict, and care for their tenants' orphaned children, while the tenants are argued to love their landlords to the point of disregarding their own survival interests.

The co-dependency of the castle and the cabins is frequently underlined. However, the only help received by the tenants amounts to clean sheets borrowed for a wake and several servings of five o'clock meals, while the landlords' family can count on, for example, the valet's (Pat Flanagan's) yearly unpaid service and the peasant-priest's full-time assistance in Terry's and Grace's hardships. Those proofs of respect and care are not comparable, especially if the difference in wealth is taken into account. Moreover, the Dillons are not concerned with their tenants' Famine trials: individual poor-house deaths, homelessness, illnesses, and difficulties in organizing acceptable funerals. They do notice changes in the general Castle Cloyne landscape and demography but do not relate it to the human beings that they had known. The reverse in this landlord-tenant relationship is, in contrast, highly personalized. It seems that the peasant

society of Castle Cloyne suffers emotional damage when the Dillons lose their estate and land. One of the "followers" who come to bid Dominic farewell laments:

> An' here's the ind ov the grand ould family that's in Castle Cloyne ever since grass grew or wather ran. … And now here is the ind of it all, an' there's the last of the Dillons lavin' out his own house, for ever an' ever. … Sweet bad luck to all the lawyers an' bailiffs, an' long life to 'em to enjoy that bad luck. (2: 173–174)

Even though the tenants are directly endangered with evictions, the narrative emphasises their regret, grief, anger and will of resistance only in relation to the Dillons' economic decline. The presentation of similar feelings in regard to their own subsistence crisis is replaced by the narrator's praises of their passivity:

> They [the peasants] were as if stunned and dazed by the magnitude of the awful calamity that had overwhelmed them; a calamity for which even the elastic Celtic nature could discover no remedy, in which it could not find the least alleviation … One feeling alone remained alive in the souls of the people, one thought that made their misery endurable, suffering with sublime endurance, and dying with patient resignation. This one sentiment was religion! The Irish peasant rarely loses his faith in God, and childlike trust in His merciful omnipotence, and it is this which enables him to endure a life of poverty and toil with patient cheerfulness, and to face death with serene composure. (162–163)

Famine is presented as a chance for each group – the ruling and the ruled – to pass the test of nationhood. The ruling class's part is to regain the ancestral land, further guide the Celtic tenant population within an increasingly more democratic British Empire, and profit from "the toilers of the soil's" work. The tenants' is to facilitate the landlords' aims (1: 169–170). *Castle Cloyne* overstates the landlords' "precarious claim to victimhood" and – allegedly in consequence – to Irishness (Fegan 215).

3. *Pomór*: Peasant Trauma as Part of National History

There are no gentry characters in *Pomór*—the entire plot is dedicated to the expansion of dehumanizing famine, accompanying epidemics, and loss of community feelings in the society of Galician peasants inhabiting the Gorce Mountains region. Since all the characters represent an isolated folk group facing their demise, reading it as a nation-building story might seem debatable. Due to the narrative frame, Orkan's novel has been deemed a depiction of peasant memory of the Great Galician Famine and its interpretation as a divine punishment for the 1846 revolt against the Polish gentry (Pigoń 288–290). This reading was outlined by Stanisław Pigoń, a literary scholar of Galician peasant descent who has been given the title of "an ideologue of folk and national culture" due to his life-long "anti-revolutionary and nationalistic cultural

[project] aiming at integrating the Polish peasantry (the people) into the sphere of national culture, understood in essentialist (primordial) terms" (Wołowiec 141). It is a base for noticing how *Pomór* might be read as deconstructing the myth of national unity due to focusing on the Famine instead of on the struggle for Polish independence.

During the Great Galician Famine two important events took place in the same year (1846)—"The events of the peasant uprising are directly connected with the nationalist uprising, or rather attempts to start it" (Rauszer, *Siła* 355). The memory of the two is interwoven – the former is said to have ruined the chances of the latter's success (355). Arson of the gentry's estates, and murders of the landlords and priests entered the national imagery as "the gentry's black legend" (Wasiewicz 152), and as symbols of the peasants' lack of national awareness (Wielgosz 26–27).

The underlying claim is that the revolt was initiated by foreign forces to more easily quench the fight for national freedom. Additionally, incorrectly deeming the people's uprising "spontaneous" and "unplanned" proves a lack of understanding regarding survival strategies and means of resistance specific to the subservient (Rauszer, *Siła* 355). This way, the struggle for subsistence is removed from the sphere of "politics," further differentiating it from the nationalist uprisings—allegedly well-organized (346-355). Thus, the members of the revolt are deprived of agency and painted as unable to even understand their class interests (similarly to the tenant population of *Castle Cloyne*). The image of peasants as a passive, easily influenced mass was crucial for the gentry's vision of Polish history and the project of a nation governed by the landed elite—"it is true that independence, the sense of freedom and in case of its loss – fighting for it, revolting, resistance and pride by no means constituted values of the peasant ethos, or instead they were not to constitute it, meaning they were not postulated and in a way exhorted to the peasantry" (Wasiewicz 153). By allowing themselves to be manipulated by the Austrians, the Galician peasantry was said to have proved unworthy of the grace planned for them by the democratic gentry: the abolition of serfdom.

The nation-centered narrative around the year 1846 insists that the peasants—whose social status in pre-abolition Polish society is often (although not without controversy) compared to at least partial slavery (it can be seen in the monograph studies of Sowa, Wasiewicz, Pobłocki, and Leszczyński)—acted against their prosperity when they rebelled against nationalist insurgents who wanted to grant them freedom. What the nationalist interpretation of Polish history does not note is the centuries of domestic serfdom, from which the landed gentry of the 1840s profited despite economic changes in the age of revolutions; the fact that the gentry's democratic intentions were mostly intentional, and that the abolition of serfdom in each partition was protested against by the Polish gentry and even seen as political repression, in terms of national martyrology (Leszczyński, *Obrońcy* 9). Nevertheless, the nation-centered narrative maintains that it was the peasant revolt that demolished national unity and required conciliation.

Consequently, the subservients' acts of armed resistance are shown not only exclusively in relation to the history of the gentry's uprising but also as antagonistic towards the armed

struggle for political freedom[3]. The latter conclusion is accompanied by a claim that the fight for independence (of a landed gentry-governed state) is much more important than life conditions (especially of murderers and thieves). This way, the agents of the people's uprising—and implicitly, peasants in general—are removed from the imagined national community. How the fight for independence and resistance against structural poverty and serfdom are evaluated and stratified in the nation-centered vision of history can be illustrated by *Pomór*'s literary criticism. Commenting on the novel's contribution to retaining the folk memory of the revolt, Poklewska presents it as if it were focused on "killing the masters," with a slight mention of famine and accompanying epidemics (72–73). In contrast, Puchalska hints at the importance of the nationalist cause in the people's 1846 revolt, not writing about the subsistence crisis at all (148).

The peasants' objectives are thus reduced to accusations of unreasonable and causeless hatred against the gentry, who had first promised abolition of serfdom and then, undeserving, were sold to the Austrian government. Detaching the revolt from the context of the subsistence crisis of the 1840s, together with the structural poverty inherent in the serfdom system, indeed makes it exaggerated at best and clueless at worst. The Famine context is virtually non-existent. Against this background, *Pomór* is a unique phenomenon in Polish literature because of all the events of the 1840s, it foregrounds the lived experience of famine. There is no mention of the nationalist uprising. The peasant revolt is related in *Pomór*— although briefly—exclusively from the people's perspective, which is a rare peasant-centered addition to the literary realizations of the elite's version of history—of 1846 and in general. The 160 remaining pages of the novel tell the story of famine- and famine-related deaths of the entire Gorce region population, following the fate of the Jamróz family. Although the peasant revolt is only referenced in the opening pages, never to reappear, it is introduced as an utmost point:

> These things were happening at the time when Vengeance went through the big houses and left behind: broken windows, damaged furniture, open barns and ashes, and corpses here and there. It was scary to look at this cruel destruction. It seemed that a spirit of doom blew the hellish sulphur at the palaces. And there was not a single big house on a significant part of the land that would survive this current. All of them stood if not utterly demolished, deteriorated … Some palaces remained, but the broken doors and windows clearly gave account that there were no people inside … from where fear and horror had expanded, now emptiness prevailed … They stood like tombs of human pride, on which war trod and which were battered by looters to wrest the riches kept by the dead. (Orkan 5)

Due to such an emphasis at the very opening of the novel, the people's revolt of 1846 is treated as an important context for the rest of the plot. The "bloody massacre" is an obligatory mention

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3   For a parallel vision of Irish late 19th and 20th century history see Allen, Kieran. *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*. Pluto Press, 2016. See also Daszyk et al.

in literary criticism of *Pomór*, and through it, the events of Famine are linked with the official, nation-centered version of Polish history.

Iconic images from "black legend" are reinterpreted and mingled with folk memories of the events. Using such phrases as "Vengeance went through the big houses" and "a spirit of doom blew the hellish sulfur," the narrator relocates the responsibility for the crimes from peasants to an unknown, higher force (5). This gets disturbingly close to the narrative about the foreign impact—"the perfidious scheme of the invaders," and nation-centered readings might argue that *Pomór* perpetuates the narrative created by the Polish gentry (Poklewska 70). On the next page, however, the narrator identifies "the looters" as peasants of the Gorce region and accuses them of stealing the sowing grain:

> But, it seemed, the landlords' grain didn't make it on the peasants' land, it didn't want to grow at all, and its example ruined the grain used to the barren soil, or even, who knows – maybe the time was such, such punishment. Since so much grain was squandered over the roads during the robbery! It was trod on like sand. God had to see this, too… So it was paid for in harvest time. There was nothing to gather. (Orkan 6)

and explains the crop failure (both grain and potatoes) as divine punishment,

> Whatever was sown – didn't grow, whatever was planted – rotted … And the people had different ideas in their gloomy minds. A story about the Jesuits was repeated – that out of spite for the world they had thrown a burial for the potatoes and that's why the potatoes rotted. There were some who believed this, because they had already utterly lost their reason and didn't know who to blame. But there were some who faced their conscience and looked at the sky with remorse; they felt in their hearts what this punishment came for, and they did not dare to voice their pleas for mercy. (7)

A conclusion could be reached that the people are punished with famine for the crime of "immorality and evil inherent in the people," "violation of the higher order's laws and cutting the nation's historical continuity" (Poklewska 70). The nation-centered narrative would suggest that the feeling of remorse relates to the murders of landlords, but a close reading of the three opening pages reveals that the peasant insurgents are directly charged only with grain and seed robberies and a lack of respect for food. Pigoń (289) and Poklewska (73) suggest that the passages explaining the crop failures as an expression of the harvest god's wrath are linked to pre-Christian tradition. In the context of the novel's main topic—famine—the importance of honoring food seems obvious. This way, the aspects of 1840s social history directly connected with survival dominate the potential nationalist exegesis.

In contrast to grain robbery, acts of vengeance—arson and murders—are transferred to an abstract entity. This decision could be treated as denying agency to the rioters, mindless tools in

the hands of unexplainable fate, instead of Austrians. But it is also worth noting that a narrative initially planned as consisting of a first-person account of Famine told by a peasant elder would observe anonymity as an essential security condition (Rauszer, *Siła* 50–52).

Those observations aside, the personification of Vengeance suggests that revenge for centuries of serfdom, systemic violence, and creating dehumanizing life conditions was an objective necessity or means of ensuring justice. This way, the unexplainable horror of famine is defined as a punishment for what is understood as a transgression in the worldview shared by the subservient, unrelatable for the gentry, and detached from the nation-centered version of history.

But since the Famine events are preceded by the 3-page exegesis of crop failure as divine intervention and connected with the grain robbery that occurred during the peasant revolt, it creates an impression that the famine trauma, shared by the peasant communities, can only be discussed in relation to the gentry's suffering, and through it also to national history. Even if famine is presented as a punishment for grain mistreatment, such a crime was possible only in conditions ensured by violating the existing power structures—in agrarian as well as social riots. Armed, violent questioning and repealing (even if for a time) subordination is "impossible to include in the dominant, national story" (Porter-Szűcs 57).

Pomór seems to be an attempt to achieve the goal of inserting the memory of famine into the nation-centered narrative by means of presenting it as the immediate context of the peasant uprising, not necessarily as its result (which is argued by Poklewska and Pigoń), but as its background. The narrator claims that after the destruction of big houses "austerity a hundred times worse than before nested in the cabins", but the first sentence of the novel signals the temporal co-existence of famine and revolt. After 160 pages of famine narrative, the novel rapidly ends with an image interpreted as a symbol of "conciliation" (Pigoń 310).

It is worth quoting in full because this way, its fragility as nation-building material is exposed. Having burnt his house, survived all the neighbors, and buried his wife, their four children, his sister—Salka—and a newborn nephew, mutilated the corpse of his enemy and shown all signs of insanity, the main character, Łukasz, heads to the famine cemetery to bury an old acquaintance:

> he went through the dense forest of mounds to the side he had firmly etched into his memory. Tripping over the graves, he went persistently on. Within this while he aged ten years. Hunched, he finally stopped by a bloody tomb … He was greeted by the nestlings' chirping. With hazed eyes he saw on the fresh grave his hat—in it a nest full of partridges. (Orkan 168)

The force of this fragment as a symbol is weak because of the context of famine. The novel about mass starvation ends when the main character sees potential food which can sustain him a bit longer. Puchalska has extended a suggestion of individual survival for Łukasz to an indication of the Galician peasants' ability to regenerate and rebuild the community after the famine horrors, although she remarks on the poor execution of this message (185).

The only way this scene can be used for conciliatory, nation-building interpretation is to connect it to the opening pages: to treat the destruction of big houses and Łukasz's encounter with the birds as a narrative frame. Pigoń explains that *Pomór* is structured as a tragedy, encompassing "tragic guilt, dynamically expanding suffering, finally relief" (310). Probably due to (self)censorship limitations in the 1950s, Pigoń's interpretation remains unclear when read outside of the broader context of the scholar's mission to create a "unified folk-national culture" realized in his works comprising literary studies, literary criticism, journalism, and life-writing (Wołowiec 128). Pigoń's vision of Polish literature as encompassing gentry-descended authors and self-taught artists who did not renounce their peasant heritage and were recognized as representatives of "high literature" relied heavily on Orkan's prose (126). In consequence, his reading of *Pomór* is extremely politicized and functionalized to reinvent the peasant identity as founded on Polishness. Implied is mutual forgiveness in the face of mutual suffering. First, the landlords atoned for centuries of systemic violence by becoming victims of peasant rioters, and then the rioters were punished for murders with famine.

4. National Unity: Founded on (Inferiors') Graves

Pigoń sees the full nest as a divine signal suggesting a common, peaceful future. Outside of Pigoń's nation-building frame of reference, however, the symbol of reconciliation found on a mass Famine grave is clearly ironic. Analogical themes in *Castle Cloyne* are, in contrast, overloaded with pathos and religious imagery and treated with absolute seriousness:

> And oh, dear God! how patient they [Famine victims] were! There was, in the time of the Famine, no outrage! There was no crime of more than the ordinary character, no breaking open provision stores, no burglaries or highway robberies. Peaceful travellers went on their own errands through town and country without the least molestation; and the general traffic and business of the country went on as usual … There was no disorder of any kind, no disturbance that would call for any special interference by the authorities. It was as if, when the last remnant of their food melted away before their eyes, all action and energy were crushed out of the wretched people; and as if their minds and souls were paralysed and dead before their bodies succumbed to the slow, agonising death of famine. (Brew 2: 162)

Brew's portrayal of peaceful extinction plays a vital role in her vision of the martyrs' nation. In the context of Land War fiction emerging in the 1880s, which problematized conflicts around land propriety, agrarian crime, and mass political emancipation, it provides a project of an Irish society in which no discord arises because every member knows their place. Catholic landowners must "turn to evictions" to save the ancestral houses, and the evicted, "the miserable people, starved and naked" be "driven from the poor cabins that were dear to them, for they represented home, either to beg, or enter the union workhouse, as it pleased them best to do," all in accordance with the law (166, 164). The Famine test of nationhood presented in *Castle*

Cloyne assumes and legitimizes mass death by starvation in the name of keeping the Irish land in Irish landlords' hands.

The message conveying potential unity between the peasants and Catholic landowners is also weakened by the unequal treatment of characters whose parallel lives and sufferings were supposed to illustrate unity between different social groups of the same nation (Morash 36–39). Hyacinth marries an English aristocrat and landowner, whose "old blood" is applauded several times. Oonagh never recovers from the loss of her first love—his betrayal and death—and raises his child as a single mother. Young Dillon regains his family's ancestral lands and residence, while young MacDermott never returns to her father's cabin. The last chapter focuses on Hyacinth's domestic "pleasant reality," and the epilogue describes Oonagh's tragic death (Brew 3: 284).

From the nation-centered perspective, it is worth noting that while Oonagh was traveling through Famine-driven Munster, saving lives or organizing honoring burials when she arrived too late, Hyacinth sought gold in California and then spent it in Italy. Oonagh's heroic deeds focused on the community's survival were given the same value as Hyacinth's random decisions, which led to the accumulation of wealth and ransoming Castle Cloyne from the "new blood's" hands.

With surprising consequence, the novel equates the Catholic gentry's landowning rights with the tenants' bare subsistence. This ideological declaration is by what Wielgosz calls "essentialization of subservient"—objectification of the unprivileged groups, such as plebeians, peasants, proletariat, women and inhabitants of the colonies, their exclusion from the community of citizens, stemming from the monopoly of private property (26). This monopoly is a recurring theme in *Castle Cloyne*—in each episode, the Dillons' right to land ownership is enshrined, while Oonagh's "self-denial" is shown as exemplary for her class.

By granting Hyacinth the ability to fulfill all his goals to show regeneration after the chaos of the Famine, his property right is suggested to be more important than his tenants' survival. Their passive, resigned portrayal in the narrative echoes "the passive victims of Mitchel's representation who do appear as something like beasts of burden" (Bexar 147).

Oonagh's plot could be resolved parallelly happily or be given an open, unclear ending. Still, it finishes with her death: right after she ceases to be necessary for the community and just before she can benefit from her life's achievements—and the restored order of Irish society. Her adopted son addresses her on the final page of the novel—"Oh, mother! … You have left me just when I could have helped to make you happy. The great loss is mine, but the great gain is all your own!" (Brew 3: 297). Although Oonagh's "great gain" might be convincing from the Catholic point of view, its meaning is detrimental to the novel's nation-centered message: the Irish nation only survives because of what causes the weakest's life sacrifices. As Fegan states—"Oonagh may die happy in her assurance of heaven, but Hyacinth's reward is much more immediate and substantial" (216). To convince the readers that Oonagh was awarded a lack of worldly happiness, the narrative highlights double standards for different social groups within the same nation.

Castle Cloyne's immediate literary context remains to be discussed. Brew's novel was published in 1885, in the midst of the Irish Land War. Although it describes the events happening

in the Hungry Forties, it was first received in the context of the No Rent Manifesto and agrarian outrages: arson, assassinations of landlords and land agents, cattle maiming, and boycotting (Hansson and Murphy 4). Brew's narrative positions the humble, uncomplaining peasantry of the 1840s and early 1850s as a role model for their descendants who, on the brink of "the last Irish Famine" of 1879, organized to demand land reform. The novel presents the Great Famine victims as doomed people who made the right choices and are moral victors, unlike those who rioted with the hope of improving their lives. It promotes the paternalistic view of the Irish rural working class, for example, by devoting whole chapters to convincing the reader that the peasants should choose their landlords as their Westminster representatives, and not trust outsiders. It mocks every Land League postulate and tries to uphold the Irish landowners' interests as national goals.

In *Pomór, the* deconstruction of the myth of national unity is equally radical but also intentional. Apart from Łukasz, whose more prolonged survival is only hinted at, the nation does not survive. The mountains are empty; the inhabitants were obliterated—first by riots, second by Famine. Reconciliation achieved in mass death is an ironic comment on the possibility of incorporating the peasants' descendants into the same nation with the landowners: the reverse of a nation-building narrative.

This reading of *Pomór* can be supported by Orkan's repeated destruction of community-building themes, most evident in *Drzewiej* [*In the Olden Days*], a novel completed two years after *Pomór*'s first edition. Its plot is structured on the scheme of a foundational myth but does not develop into a story of progress, survival, and reproductive success. Instead, a major disagreement divides the "first family," every character dies, and their aim of civilizing the mountains is not continued.

Orkan's insistence on killing off everyone in narratives that initially create expectations of a positive, community-forging message proves a lack of belief in the peaceful co-existence of individuals in general and not only within the frame of a hierarchized nation. The conviction that it is impossible to merge the ruled into a national community created by and for the ruling class is an important feature of Orkan's writings. This is especially evident in Orkan's commentary on post-independence Poland. His comparison of the class division in Polish post-independence society to relations between the Zulu people and the British colonizers resembles contemporary recognitions of the "two nations" syndrome—strict separation of the "cattle" ("bydło") from the "masters" as a result of systemic violence against the subservient in Polish history (Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia* 9–47). "Polish society is broken into two parts which distrust and resent each other", as Leszczyński summarizes Orkan's image of 1920s Poland (*No dno* 103). This recognition doubles the disunity between the landed gentry (the Protestant Ascendancy as well as Catholic landlords) and tenants in Irish 19th and 20th-century history (Allen).

5. Salka and Oonagh: a Shared Famine Biography

The artificial character of national conciliation in *Pomór* and *Castle Cloyne* is even more apparent in the comparative reading. Similarities in how their Famines lived experience is narrated – regardless of the exact point on the map of the 1840s subsistence crisis – make Salka and Oonagh much more united in suffering than Oonagh and Hyacinth or Salka and the gentry killed in peasant revolt. It is they and their families who die of starvation and famine-related causes. The Dillons and other landlords never want food, even if they lose generational wealth. Terry MacNamara's single example only further endorses social divisions because it is treated as an ultimate transgression of hierarchy.

A comparative reading of Brew's and Orkan's famine novels reveals the use of the same character type. Both Oonagh and Salka exemplify the trope of a self-sacrificial woman who, despite her weakness and multi-layered vulnerability, endures suffering to save others. Their famine journeys begin because they value someone else's right to property more than their safety: Oonagh decides to pay her father's rent debt. Salka tries to find and bring back her brother's cow, which was stolen by her love interest, for whose guilt she feels responsible. Securing the landlord's money and the brother's cattle is shown as a matter of Oonagh's and Salka's honor. In addition, both are characterized as chaste and detached from sexuality. Oonagh's love is only discussed in romantic terms, while Salka's pregnancy is an effect of rape and adds to her suffering twice: because of the sexual assault trauma and the feeling of obligation to give birth. Both young women are portrayed as determined to survive for the sake of their children; both voluntarily give up their own scarce rations to feed adult men; both personify Catholic morality and "self-denial" in the face of earth-shattering events.

This character type's central role in *Castle Cloyne* is consistent with depicting a starving society as compliant with the Catholic version of morality, submissive and immune to emancipatory acts of resistance. In *Pomór,* however, Salka's consequent altruism seems ill-suited to the collective portrait of individuals fighting for survival against each other, severed with grief and deprived of communal solidarity. This observation leads to the conclusion that gendered stereotypes and unrealistic expectations towards women survive even in a narrative about the destruction of community bonds.

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Behind the Appearances: Spaces and Places in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982)

Abstract. Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982) depicts a world in which the landscape governs both the characters' and the readers' perceptions. Analyzing the novel's duplicities and peculiarities, as well as the author's individual approach to fiction writing, the article identifies sources for the plains' uniqueness. Murnane's language, along with the writing process, is a bearer of the quality termed uncanniness which shapes the (un)reality of *The Plains* by employing contrasts and evoking the feeling of un/familiarity in the reader. Following the trope of in-betweenness, the article views the novel through the prism of liminality, treating its various components as sites of transformation. As the further analysis of both the spaces/places of the novel and the protagonist-narrator's personal experience illustrates, the plains subvert this seemingly linear process of transformation and, opposing their occupants' attempts to gain control, prove their own existence as the influential, yet elusive, force on the novel's reality. In essence, the article aims to explore Murnane's portrayal of this idiosyncratic landscape, probing the applicability of capturing or defining the plains, be it by the protagonist's camera and senses or our theoretical tools.

Keywords: *The Plains*, Gerald Murnane, liminality, the uncanny, spaces and places

1. Exploring *The Plains*

"No two mountain peaks are alike, but anywhere on earth the plains are one and the same," wrote Jorge Luis Borges, an inspiration for Gerald Murnane (460). Those very words, however, do not correspond with landscapes created by the Australian writer whose way of shaping the fictional worlds separates him from the rest of fiction writers especially concerned with the landscapes in their works. *The Plains* (1982) is Murnane's most famous novel, which on the one hand follows the author's previous creations—*Tamarisk Row* and *A Lifetime on Clouds*—and their

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preoccupation with one's existence in the idiosyncratic Australian landscape[2]; on the other, it marks Murnane's moment of attaining authorial maturity and crystallization of style, and defines his signature themes. Like all of Murnane's early literary efforts, the book in its present form—*The Plains* stems from a longer, unpublished work *The Only Adam*—is a compromise made for the sake of marketability, and does not fully reflect his intentions. It was not until *Barley Patch* (2009) that Murnane could write his fiction under no restrictions. On the bright side, the publication of *The Plains* proved to be a catalyst for the audience's and scholars' rising interest in Murnane's original writing. Curiously, he regards *The Plains* as one of his minor works.

The Plains tells a simple story of a filmmaker, who twenty years before had arrived on the plains to capture on film the distinctive culture of the peculiar landowning families. In the first paragraph of the book the narrator recalls, "I looked for anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances" (Murnane, *The Plains* 1). Surrounded by the seemingly endless and impenetrable landscape, the filmmaker sets out to collect material for the script for his film, *The Interior*. Talking and interacting with the mysterious plainsmen, he explores the history and habits of the nameless persons, who take pride in their individuality and withdrawal from the rest of the country. The community the filmmaker engages with is tight-knit, hardly approachable, almost homogenized—it is hard to differentiate one landowner from the other—but in conflict at the same time; they are divided into the Haremen and the Horizonites. All this creates an aura of unwelcomeness as if they were disturbed and endangered by the protagonist-narrator's presence. The element of paradox, or double-sidedness in *The Plains*, is omnipresent and appears both through the filmmaker's impossible aim to expose through creative undertaking the 'real' nature of the place he resides in and through the ambiguous, unidentifiable qualities that place contains. The sentences of *The Plains* emanate with ambivalence, multiplicity of options, and secrecy, for instance "exploring two landscapes—one continually visible but never accessible and the other always invisible even though one crossed and recrossed it daily" (45). The two landscapes, or rather two possibilities presented at the same time, along with the cultural side of the filmmaker's surroundings, are explored by him from a distance created by those landscapes. The distance is manifest regarding the structure and the narrative of the novel, concerned with interactions with plainsmen, the aforementioned exploration of the environment, but also, as the story progresses, the relationship between the filmmaker and the daughter of his patron. All the time the protagonist-narrator is distanced, on the margin, outside looking in—or trying to look in. Appointing a dominant plane of events out of the aforementioned three would prove futile since *The Plains* is devoid of an expendable word or sentence, and so of the thematical and structural contents as well. Regarding the structure, Harriet L. McInerney observes that it is

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2   Calling Murnane's works' setting "the Australian landscape" is a simplification for the sake of clearness of expression. As will become evident later, the matter is vaguer.

difficult to locate. The three parts that make up *The Plains* could suggest a traditional three-act structure. However, in reality, the majority of the action occurs in part 1, compared to the shorter and more self-reflective parts 2 and 3. In this way, the focus of the novel textually shifts from the exterior of the plainsmen to the unknown interior of the filmmaker. (139)

Not only does Murnane subvert the reader's expectations regarding the depiction of a particular place and its inhabitants on the stratum of the text, but he also overturns the structural pattern, unevenly distributing the amount of portrayed events and changing their dimension—from the outsider's point of view recalling the initial shock upon getting in contact with the plains in the first part, to that of the inquisitive researcher in the second part, to the confused, disillusioned— once again—outsider's point of view in the third part. What is crucial here is the ever-present binary of inside–outside, regardless of the depicted events and narrative focus.

The Plains proves categorizational difficulty by balancing on the border of reality and unreality, by evoking a sense of existing outside of the familiarity of novelistic setting and characterization, and by a certain self-containment. Additionally, self-reflexivity, pertaining to Murnane's oeuvre, offers additional insight into this particular title. Murnane, however, warned the audience not to approach his writing with a false conviction that he had in mind a "step-by-step program" (Giramondo Publishing). The similarities, echoes, stylistic development, or thematic preoccupations are nevertheless impossible to ignore. For example, the first paragraph of *The Plains,* "Twenty years ago, when I first arrived on the plains, I kept my eyes open. I looked for anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances," appears to be transformed into the first paragraph in *Border Districts*,

Two months ago, when I first arrived in this township just short of the border, I resolved to guard my eyes, and I could not think of going on with this piece of writing unless I were to explain how I came by that odd expression. (3)

Murnane's characteristic tendency to juxtapose opposites is visible right away—the placement of action in time is the joint element, but while in the former book the temporal distance is great, in the latter it is the opposite. Then, the phrase "when I first arrived" is repeated, which, through the synecdochical treatment of *Border Districts*, exemplifies Murnane's use of themes of arrival in a strange place—or rather, a strange space, since, following Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction, it has not yet been endowed with value—and the protagonists-narrators' attempts to comprehend and find their footing in a new situation. Later in the paragraphs the settings differ, but the actions related to perceiving the new surroundings again link the two books together. This time, the former curiosity, determination, and the aim of revealing the hidden are superseded by the latter's protection, unexplained action, and inability to pursue the intended task. Through opposites, the connection is established. Then again, toward the end of both paragraphs, although the initial reactions differ, the artistic undertaking binds the two together—the protagonist-narrator

of *The Plains* is a filmmaker, and the protagonist-narrator of *Border Districts* expresses his intention to continue writing. More instances of similar textual correspondence can be found in the writer's oeuvre, but the major takeaway here is that "[t]he metafictional and theoretical undercurrent which characterizes many of Murnane's books, especially from *The Plains* onward … offers a valuable insight into [his] philosophical beliefs and his idea of fiction" (Bartoloni 41). That theoretical undercurrent, however, needs to be considered with caution, for, as Murnane wrote in 2007, the literary theory he had been taught never fully convinced him; rather, he felt it unrelated to his own experience as a reader, let alone a would-be writer of fiction (*Tamarisk Row* 7). As the quote above emphasizes, *The Plains* not only marks Murnane's technical abilities entering a more advanced phase but also capably illustrates his intent and personal convictions regarding fiction's potential.

In an interview conducted not long after the publication of *The Plains*, Murnane answered a question regarding his focus on consciousness rather than actions outside of one's mind, on emotions rather than speech, with the words,

> If you want characters with names and quoted speech, then, presumably, you want to believe that fiction is an imitation of what you call the real world. You had better go and sit in front of your television set. My fiction is a report of the contents of my mind. I don't try to convince my readers that my writing shows them the real world, whatever that is. My books are set in the landscapes of my mind. (Braun-Bau and Murnane 45)

Moreover, Murnane perceives human relationships and his mind as landscapes, "a composite of all the places I've been—and other places, of course" (46). Throughout his books, *The Plains* especially, he traverses between the self and the other, and it may be said that his main character undergoes a process of reverse-illumination (not obscuration), since in the last scene of the book his final gesture is pointing a camera at his own eye, and thus, as Murnane claimed,

> *The Plains* is about seeing. The narrator is trying to learn what it actually is to see. If you're looking for meaning, go to the last pages of the book. The drunken plainsman argues that everything is becoming invisible, even while we're looking at it or, rather *because* we're looking at it. I thought while I was writing that passage "If you look into an eye, you see only darkness." And yet, as the plainsman says, that's where the visible world is. We think our minds are brightly lit, but I know they're in darkness. (46)

Upon finishing *The Plains* and experiencing its protagonist-narrator's gesture suggesting either defeat or reconciliation with his inability to discover what exists behind the appearances of the landscape, the protagonist's and the narrative's lack of typical transformation displays Murnane's individualistic philosophy—joining literary landscapes with the author's inner life and convictions about the novel's possibilities. Such a reading of *The Plains* corresponds with

the writer's proneness to use the one to turn attention to the other. The work of fiction is his means and ends to achieve so.

Considering various aims, journeys, and ideals of Murnane's characters, his writerly approach becomes apparent. The characters' individualism and occasional inaction under their objectives create still more oppositional 'two-sidednesses'—despite the in-text narrative movement of those characters and the vastness of the created worlds, the protagonists' outcomes are unsuccessful; simultaneously, they unveil different, unexpected outcomes, neither one nor the other, which, as showcased above, is exactly the case of *The Plains* and its final scene. In this respect, Murnane—or, in any case, his book(s)—presents himself as an idealist who is "not tethered to a reductive idea of things as they are" (Birns 160–161). His writings are a reflection of his own mental landscapes and not merely imagined worlds of fiction. J. M. Coetzee even called him "a radical idealist," whose "fictional personages or 'image-persons' … have their existence in a world much like the world of myth, purer, simpler, and more real than the world in which their mundane avatars are born, live, and die" (268). On the surface, *The Plains* is a simple tale, which nevertheless contains a multitude of surprising solutions, idiosyncrasies, and inimitable urgency in reflecting the nature of the world as existing in one's mind. In a word, *The Plains* is an "anti-Australian novel" (Osborne 53), which, to borrow Murnane's own recent words from *Last Letter to a Reader*, "was written for the purest of all motives – it was written because it *had* to be written" (37).

2. The Uncanny Quality of Murnane's Writing

Murnane's writing is unique, yet his technicality, precision, choice of words, certain tendencies and obsessions, would place his writerly sensitivity next to Borges and his labyrinthine syntax; Hardy and his sentimentality; Proust and his preoccupation with the temporal dimension of language. But besides the many associations, evocations, and categories one might attribute to Murnane's style, it is the act of writing the text that offers valuable insight. This insight into what happens behind the scenes is significant not only because of the effect the writer's words might have on the reader or of their receptiveness to theoretical interpretation, but because the very act of writing adds to the final product an important layer of the personal, illuminating the author's works still more strongly.

The language Murnane operates with shows a tendency to evoke the qualities pertaining to the concept of the uncanny first analyzed in relation to fiction by Ernst Jentsch, who wrote that "the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of [the reader's] attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away" (13). Had it been purposeful on the Australian's part, it could be said that this is Murnane's strategy of writing. Nevertheless, the disorientation caused by "a correlation 'new/foreign/hostile' [that] corresponds to the psychical association of 'old/known/familiar'" is inherent in Murnane's use of language and the effects it has on the reader (9). The identification and exploration of this uncanny quality of Murnane's writing will allow for a better understanding of his individual, intricate representation of the real/the fictional (non-)Australian landscape.

Murnane writes using a typewriter from the 1960s, clicking keys one at a time, which allows him to match the speed with which his thoughts formulate and to accurately process them onto the paper. The conditions of his surroundings—the lack of distracting items, closed curtains, lamplight turned on during the day—allow him to feel "enclosed from the world, removed from the world for the time being" ("The Writing Room" 00:01:06–09). Those elements, being not solely bits of trivia, are points of departure regarding Murnane's authorial distinctness. His mental removal from the real world and simultaneous elevation of focus result in the metaphorical relocation into *Another World in This One* (Uhlmann). That relocation, put less enigmatically, means simply a moment of writing, the author's state—somewhere between the everyday reality and the fictional realm of imagination. In his article, Paolo Bartoloni calls it "an interpretation of the act of writing as that process in-between reality and a further dimension" (40). This "another world" is thus a channel through which the language of the author moves to crystalize on the page.

While writing, Murnane disturbs that process by reading the sentences aloud. This, in turn, accentuates the significance the language bears for the writer. In the article "Why I Write What I Write," he meticulously explained,

> I write sentences. I write first one sentence, then another sentence. I write sentence after sentence. I write a hundred or more sentences each week and a few thousand sentences a year. After I've written each sentence, I read it aloud. I listen to the sound of the sentence, and I don't begin to write the next sentence unless I'm absolutely satisfied with the sound of the sentence I'm listening to.

Even in this short passage repetitions disorientate us but eventually convey the author's intention as precisely as possible, and so the language itself obtains the double-sidedness present throughout Murnane's fiction. As is the case with the elements concerned with the content of *The Plains*, the author's choice of words results in binarity in the book as well, since one element turns attention to the other. Sometimes it is the lack that conveys the message. For example, as McInerney observes regarding the plainsmen in the book, "The ulterior reality appears to draw on both the landscape of central Australia and national cultural anxieties to create the society and belief system of the plainsmen. However, nothing is spelled out clearly" (137). Thus, both the presence and the absence, the highlighted and the obscured are equally significant on the language level. Murnane's intention when shaping sentences and deciding on their purpose appears ambiguous as well; in between one and the other, between the precision of the message and the understatement. The sound of the sentences allows Murnane to exteriorize the authority he seeks in his creative effort and to recognize his authorial voice. But the very reason for the appearance of his words, as he accounts, is their haunting on his inside, "My sentences arise out of images and feelings that haunt me—not always painfully; sometimes quite pleasantly" (Murnane, "Why I Write What I Write").

The Plains' aforementioned multivocal instances of dependence on the one to underline the other and to highlight the invisible using the visible present a recurring pattern. An example of

such idiosyncrasy would be, "And her face was not quite so untroubled as I had hoped so that I had to visualize some of the compelling close-ups anew in the final scenes of my film" (Murnane, *The Plains* 90). The sentence, although inconspicuous and grammatically uncomplicated, contains a deeper layer. The protagonist-narrator here refers to his patron's daughter, who in the later part of the novel becomes his object of interest. The very description of her face, an act of conveying important information, is done not simply by the attribution of a certain expression to it so that it would read affirmative 'her face was troubled,' but instead by slightly confusing negation, "not … untroubled." In this way, the main clause of the sentence obtains the uncanny quality, which may be understood as "finding its strangeness by hovering between the known and the unknown or what is ordinary and what is not" (McInerney 134). Then, the face in question is neither one nor the other, it is somewhere in between troubled and untroubled expression. Additionally, "as I had hoped" further complicates the imaginary positioning of the sentence between the one and the other, since the description of the woman's face turns out to be not a report of her expression right there and then, but a failed expectation of the protagonist-narrator. Thus, what the sentence conveys is neither an actual facial expression nor is it simply a figment of the filmmaker's imagination since, in the scene, she physically sits in front of him—it is an uncanny description of what it is not in relation to his failed expectation.

Another example illustrating Murnane's tendency to use words in an unexpected way reads, "Odd to think that of all the plainsfolk lying asleep … not one has seen the view of the plains that I am soon to disclose" (*The Plains* 5–6). In the passage, at that point of the novel's development, the protagonist-narrator is unaware of the failure of his artistic venture that is to become manifest throughout the last pages. In the first part of the sentence, one of the most common words in the English language "all" is supplemented with the banal "lying asleep." However, it is not the obscurity of the language that constitutes Murnane's writerly power, but the meaning behind juxtaposing and connecting certain words instead of others that require closer analysis. Following the established pattern, the subject "all the plainsfolk" means presence, inclusivity, unity regarding a certain group of people, while the state they find themselves in evokes opposite associations. "Lying asleep" suggests disconnection and absence, and thus the relation between those two phrases effects in combining words of oppositional nature. Moreover, the words "of all the plainsmen lying asleep" read together ultimately present a vision either of total isolation or of the protagonist-narrator's exceptionality. Now, the latter part of the sentence is marked with yet another conundrum. The plainsfolk appear to have not seen (previously somehow hidden?) part of the plains which only the protagonist-narrator is able to reveal. In this way, the "lying asleep" of the inhabitants might be understood not only as a neurobiological condition but also in terms of ignorance or inability to see that which for them is supposed to be constantly visible. Eventually, both understandings can coexist. In effect, it appears, as Murnane accounted, "that the subject matter, the potential subject matter of what I am writing about is almost infinite," which again points to the uncanny sphere of un/familiarity, this time found in the unboundedness of meaning in which Murnane operates linguistically (Indyk).

Murnane clashes the known with the unknown in yet another sentence, focused on the protagonist-narrator's idea of the intended reception of his film-in-progress—"I had sometimes thought of *The Interior* as a few scenes from a much longer film that could only be seen from a vantage point that I knew nothing of" (*The Plains* 86). The mention of the film immediately turns attention to its content which is actually unknown both to the filmmaker and to the reader. There is only an intention or an effort to capture the plainsmen's reality. Now, as the sentence suggests, if *The Interior* took its final shape of only a few scenes as a part of a bigger whole, then its contents would be known to the filmmaker, while the rest would remain unknown. The "much bigger film" the reader knows nothing about creates infinite room for imagination—the filmmaker's artistic effort thereby oscillates between completion and never-ending possibility. Moreover, the subordinate clause "that could only be seen from a vantage point that I knew nothing of" comprises a precise condition under which *The Interior* could be seen, which is immediately followed by information about the filmmaker's obliviousness, and thus his inability to enact that very scenario (86). The "vantage point" is a choice of words that does not appear accidental since it represents two different meanings. It first relates to a personal, particular way of thinking about a given issue—the definition that overlaps with the filmmaker's position as an outsider, inherently unable to see the film—and the plains' 'real' nature—in the same way that, most likely, inhabitants of the plains would see it. The second meaning of the "vantage point" relates to a place that allows for clear observation of one's area. This corresponds with Murnane's preoccupation with and employment of the surroundings in *The Plains* in a way that the filmmaker, in order to 'properly see' the film, would have to find himself in a specific physical place, which never happens. On those grounds, the latter interpretation is less convincing, but it stresses the metaphorical plane of the novel and its uncanny use of language still more. In the above-mentioned possibilities and the double-meaning found in the analyzed sentence lies Murnane's ability to use the English language in a truly individual way.

The analyzed examples illustrate the Australian author's linguistic distinctness. Linking together relatively simple words and phrases, he manages to create double meanings, contrasts, and hidden layers which add up to a broader quality termed uncanniness. The ordinary and the unordinary, and the familiar and the unfamiliar, mingle and shape the uncertain, eerie, disorienting (un)reality of and in *The Plains*.

3. Liminality of *The Plains*

Liminality is a concept first introduced by folklorist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in *Rites de Passage* and later elaborated on by Victor Turner, which focused on the middle stage of rites of passage among certain small-scale communities. Van Gennep stressed the universality of the concept, merely detecting a pattern observable in different cases of his studies. As the author of the article *The Uses and Meanings of Liminality* corroborates, "all societies use rites to demarcate transitions" (Thomassen 6). With time, liminality proved its interpretative potential not only in anthropological or sociological contexts, but in a wider array of studies as well, and

began being employed interdisciplinarily. Van Gennep differentiated three periods present in a period of transition. 'Preliminal' signifies breaking from one's past self; 'liminal' relates to the actual passing through the threshold and to the changes in the initiate's identity caused by it; 'postliminal' marks the entering back into one's former environment but as a new, changed entity. Additionally, four categories of rites of passage were suggested, regarding people, places, situations, and time.

The structural and categorizational divisions outlined above—especially in view of *The Plains*—allow for a clear definition presented in *Landscapes of Liminality*,

> "Liminality" describes a state or location that is transitional, subjective, ambivalent, unstable, and marginal and that opens up new possibilities in a binary system; liminal phenomena occupy "middle-way" positions between two states or locations by being—paradoxically—neither or both of them at the same time. (Downey et al. 31)

The abolition of the binary division, along with the possibility of embracing neither or both impressions created by a given sign (e.g. words), produces an effect similar to that of the uncanny quality scrutinized earlier. But while the uncanniness of Murnane's writing educed an effect of confusion, puzzlement, or an inability to pinpoint the dominant message, and the focus of the analysis was particularly on language, the concept of liminality does not necessarily entail effects that might be deemed 'negative'; it relates to a certain process that Murnane's novel contains in various shapes. Similarities between the two, however, are inevitable due to some of their overlapping characteristics. Thus, the environment in *The Plains* could be analyzed in terms of uncanniness, but it is the concept of liminality that allows for a more revealing analysis.

Liminality's manifestations can be found in one of the earliest journeys in the world of literature, that of Odysseus. "[A]n entire series of trials and testing, including separation, shipwreck, and encounters with monsters … until the hero's eventual return" were identified as unaccidental concerning the history of the written word (Horvath et al. 79). It is thus not surprising that contemporary literature, perhaps even in a more pronounced manner, still exudes the same—but developed—sensibilities. By way of creative development, liminality in recent fiction is not limited only to a template of the hero's journey but can branch out to all components of a given work of fiction. Through this dispersion of the liminal characteristic and its very 'open' nature, contemporary literature possesses suitable means for the representation and examination of our inner lives. As Van den Bossche and Wennerscheid wrote

> Contemporary literature makes for a particularly good testing ground to study these dynamics because its aim is not to prove a fictional character's way of life right or wrong but to present his or her emotional ambivalences concomitant with the experience of transformation and transition. (Van den Bossche and Wennerscheid 2)

Then, the employment of the concept of liminality in a given work of fiction, and the interpretation of that work through that concept, are closer to an impartial observation of a natural phenomenon than to a concrete underlying structure. This approach applies to *The Plains* which, through various manifestations of the concept, presents a world that appears part-real and part-fictional. There is, however, an important fact to bear in mind—although in the book there are multiple instances of liminality's emergence, *The Plains*—by liminality's definition and Murnane's rejection of theory-based creation—does not programmatically adhere to this or any other theoretical framework.

Considering *The Plains* from a distance, the concept of liminality appears applicable. Since "liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes," parallels between each aforementioned element and the book can be drawn (Horvath et al. 2). Dislocation happens through the general portrayal of a place called Australia which Murnane presents in the novel. Ian Adam notes that "the novel systematically challenges our notion of 'Australia,'" and after a thorough dissection of different possible interpretations of the place—involving its geographical and political subclassifications, conceptual and symbolic distinction—points to the fact that in the novel Murnane, out of those differing definitions, creates a version of Australia "with a large division between what is to be known at [sic] 'Outer Australia' and 'The Plains'" (25). Moreover, the protagonist-narrator "journeys to the interior from an area called Australia until he reaches a region which is no longer Australia" (25). Thus, the dislocation occurs through the author's purposeful rejection of a faithful reflection of the place of the events, and through substituting it with 'familiarly unfamiliar' space that simultaneously resembles and reconstructs Australia. The second element, the reversal of hierarchies, is visible in the character of the protagonist-narrator who—not colonially invading the landscape—comes to the plains dedicated to preserving the distinctive culture of the inhabitants; his character is closer to being an observer than an invader. Then, not hostility per se, but unreceptiveness and progressive disappointment mark his relationship with the plainsmen and their land. But the tension, at times, can be detected—in one scene, as the filmmaker awaits the coming of wealthy landowners into the bar in hopes of finding a patron, he states—"I tried not to look agitated, and I watched my companions closely" (Murnane, *The Plains* 13). Later, once he manages to find a patron and is allowed to move through his estate, he narrates—"My patron, the girl's father, required me to drink with him for an hour or two on the verandah after dinner every evening" (91). Those two examples illustrate, to the narrator's detriment, the slightly uneven power relation. Being an outsider places the narrator, inversely to the usual pattern, in a position of less power and control than the plainsmen hold. The third element constituting the concept of liminality, that of unpredictable future and outcomes, is visible in the whole artistic endeavor of the filmmaker but also in the plainsmen's concern with preserving their lifestyle and traditions. Throughout the majority of *The Plains*, only the filmmaker's intention is known, but it is constantly postponed by distracting marginalia and the

place's resonance. At one point he says, "They would learn the truth when *The Interior* appeared as a film" (10). But the whole issue remains in the realm of possibility and indefiniteness until the novel's quasi-denouement. Paul Genoni writes in his article about the narrator digressing into the complexities of his surroundings—"He has been defeated by a conundrum; the more he contemplates the place referred to as the plains, the more he wonders if they exist at all in the usual physical sense" (138). Defeated, influenced by his patron's fascination with the concept of Time[3], he concludes that it "cannot be used for the production of a unified vision of space," which is, paradoxically, exactly what plainsmen strive for (138). Thus, it is not only the space he tries to capture through his camera and his senses that disallows him to complete his quest, but also the passage of time. Attributing to it the concept of liminality, all the events in the novel in the 20-year span, along with the place's very nature, appear as a continuous moment of transition in which the narrator disintegrates rather than obtains a new identity.

The statement that "[l]iminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and 'reality' itself, can be carried in different directions" corresponds with *The Plains*' elusiveness when it comes to their clear definition (Thomassen 5). The vision of the landscape proposed by Murnane is unstable, never fully graspable. At one point, after telling the plainsmen an eventless story, the filmmaker reports that "[the plainsmen] supposed that the artists who presented such things had been beguiled by the noises of crowds or the profusions of shapes and surfaces in the foreshortened landscapes of the world beyond the plains" (Murnane, *The Plains* 11). The plains that they see are established as a point of reference and orientation, which results in the novel's "tropes of disintegration, in which external place affects the interior of the subject" (Stockton 51). This process can be referred to the filmmaker's disintegration analyzed above and to the equally affected plainsmen. Certain passages exemplify the evolution of their sensibilities and the indubitable influence the landscape has (had) on them, for example, the one relating prior explorations into the inland:

> There were historians who suggested that the phenomenon of the plains themselves was responsible for the cultural differences between the plainsmen and Australians generally. … What had at first seemed utterly flat and featureless eventually disclosed countless subtle variations of landscape and an abundance of furtive wildlife. Trying to appreciate and describe their discoveries, the plainsmen had become unusually observant, discriminating, and receptive to gradual revelations of meaning. Later generations responded to life and art as their forebears had confronted the miles of grassland receding into haze. They saw the world itself as one more in an endless series of plains. (Murnane, *The Plains* 12)

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3   This influence can also be seen in terms of power relations and thus refer back to that second element of liminality regarding hierarchical inversion—here, the patron serves as a cause for the narrator's doubt.

Firstly, the land's transitional aspect is visible—the former "flat and featureless" terrain with time revealed its richness. Subsequently, through exposure to the landscape's qualities, the plainsmen and their vantage point changed. But the post-liminal period resulted in alienation, instead of assimilation. The disclosure of the plains' meanings proved insufficient, which is why they started employing artists in order to expose one definite meaning, and under the landscape's influence they developed an obsession with the subject, the phenomenon possibly responsible for bringing out the differences between them and other Australians. Especially telling here is the unusual observance of the plainsmen, for it signifies another paradox found in the novel—it is, in fact, futile, since the plains appear as "miles of grassland receding into haze," eventually defying definition and allowing limited explanation. "The disintegration of bodily and spatial coherence through the disruption of visuality [which are] particularly apparent within *The Plains*" refers both to the example above and the previous analysis of the patron's daughter's facial expression (Stockton 127). Those instances emphasize not only the suspension in the liminal space of the plains but also underline the susceptibility to their influence. The plains, in effect, become the novel's agents, embracing on yet another level the hierarchical reversal attributed to liminality and further destabilizing the novel's axioms.

Every attempt, past or present, at capturing the essence of the plains, whether by senses or by a camera, eventually proves futile. Thus, Murnane's vision presented in *The Plains* does not depict a place, but, as the analysis shows, an invariably subjective, unidentifiable, liminal space neither fully subservient to the characters' actions nor influential to the point of authority.

4. The Protagonist-Narrator and his Experience of Spaces and Places

The previous analyses employing the concepts of uncanniness and liminality lead us to the further investigation into the peculiarities of *The Plains*—the novel's use of anonymity, the protagonist-narrator's agency, his relationships and his experience of spaces and places in the novel. As the editors of *Landscapes of Liminality* remark "[T]he study of liminality poses to us the problems of categorization and the limitations of language in defining not only geophysical space and/or place, but conceptual, emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical spatial dynamics" (Downey et al. 6). Those problems are inherent to the subject matter of Murnane's novel and resurface in the embracing of the contraries and multiplicity of meanings, and in recognizing the significance of the characters' emotionality regarding each other and their surroundings.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist-narrator undergoes a change elicited by various factors. In the process, his agency regarding the spaces/places he occupies requires detailed inquiry. At the outset of the filmmaker's narration, just after his arrival on the plains, he finds himself in a hotel room reveling in the contentment of his quest

> Late that night I stood at a third-storey window of the largest hotel in the town. I looked past the regular pattern of streetlights towards the dark country beyond. A breeze came in warm gusts from the north.

> I leaned into the surges of air that rose up from the nearest miles of grassland. I composed my face to register a variety of powerful emotions. And I whispered words that might have served a character in a film at the moment when he realized he had found where he belonged. (Murnane, *The Plains* 4–5)

The emotional connectedness with the view and with the hotel room is evoked not only by the implicit sense of motivation and power that marks his quest and physical position but by the atmosphere and the visual aspect of the plains. A "breeze [that] came in warm gusts" and "surges of air" provoke him to "register a variety of powerful emotions." Thus, the scene does not solely depict the filmmaker as the central figure for whom the surroundings and the conditions serve only as a background—they simultaneously influence his behavior. The words he whispers and the thematic reflection point to his feeling of belongingness which destabilizes the binarity of spaces/places. On the one hand, the space of the room that the filmmaker occupies serves him as nothing more than an environment for work, and his connection to it does not deepen with time; on the other hand, his reception of and reaction to what he perceives outside of the window tend to favor the definition of a place since the view's resonance is evident. Marc Augé's concept of "non-places," a transitory space that enables anonymity, could prove its interpretative usefulness as well.

Regarding the anonymity of the characters, a telling part of the characterization, the filmmaker remains nameless, the landowners are referred to only as 1ST LANDOWNER, 2ND LANDOWNER, etc., and, similarly, the filmmaker's patron, his daughter, and wife are known only by their roles. This, combined with the anonymity of the place creates still more distance in the protagonist-landscape-reader triangle. "The lack of naming in *The Plains* takes its focus away from the named Australian landscape and into an imagined interior," which encapsulates both the physical plane of events and the personal one (McInerney 142). The third instance of the interior's manifestation is that of the film-in-progress title. The novel's inland is complemented by the filmmaker's solipsistic first-person point of view, for even when he recalls someone else's words, it is still a part of his retrospection. His movement between sole points of reference (a hotel room, a bar lounge) is met with a singular mention of a vaguely defined space—Eternal Plain, which the filmmaker strives to expose through the film medium. But the idea of this ultimate space which "might have lain beyond or within all that [the man he filmed] had ever seen" gets dispersed as soon as it appears, and thus any potential for establishing connection and so of the transformation of that space into place is inevitably lost (Murnane, *The Plains* 79).

An instance of the place in Tuan's understanding can be found in the aforementioned saloon bar, where the protagonist talks with the plainsmen and researches their culture. In the process, the transformation occurs through the passage of time and the protagonist's endowing the formerly unfamiliar space with his accumulating experiences,

> And then the door from the street was flung open and a new group of plainsmen came in from the dazzling sunlight with their afternoon's work done and settled themselves at the bar to resume

their lifelong task of shaping from uneventful days in a flat landscape the substance of myth.
(Murnane, *The Plains* 17)

The saloon bar's existence as a place, instead of a space, is twofold—what facilitates it is both the personal reception of the filmmaker and the plainsmen's "task of shaping from uneventful days in a flat landscape the substance of myth," the routine to which they are dedicated. Reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's example of the house, the place of their meetings facilitates daydreaming. After all, plainsmen daydream of capturing and preserving their way of living. Later in the scene appears a man willing to publish some of the plainsmen's writings, which leads to discussions about the arts.

Once they subside, the bar 'reappears,' and this time the filmmaker tries to recall some note he had made,

After lunch, when I was drinking steadily again and things around me had regained their vibrancy, I succeeded in recalling a note I had made in the margin of the scholar's article: 'I, a filmmaker, am admirably equipped to explore this landscape and reveal it to others.' (46)

The bar then offers the filmmaker regaining not only his memory of the note but the self-confidence and feeling of exceptionality regarding his objective. What this detail reveals is, besides the protagonist's disillusionment that takes place throughout the novel, the attempted reinforcement of beliefs. In the filmmaker's eyes, his occupation signifies a higher calling, which gets challenged by the very subject matter of his film-in-progress. The recollection in the passage could thus be read as the protagonist's narcissistic gesture or a sign of a wavering sense of purpose elicited by the occupied spaces/places. In any respect, after taking into account the very little information he reveals about himself, his pre/occupation becomes his character's defining point.

The spaces/places the protagonist occupies and tries to capture are inseparable from the technological device he uses—a camera. As Lana Stockton observes, the characters of *The Plains* "seek to depict, record, piece together … that which evades interpretation, playing out an unsatisfied search for meaning through visual devices" so as to relocate what is hidden in the unspecified space to the sphere of visibility, the place (142). This action is crucial insofar as the filmmaker's reception of spaces goes, for in this way his device becomes an element inextricably connected with the spatial dimension. Moreover, the camera's presence creates a link between itself and the protagonist. Thus, what connects the two is the inability to peek behind the surface. "The equivalency that Murnane draws between the eyes of the narrator and his camera constructs a spectral body as a signifier of discontinuous, ungraspable space," which, defying transformation, unchangingly accompanies the protagonist (128). This 'spatial condition' can also be found in the scene where the patron shows the filmmaker his photographs. In those, the photographed people always turn their heads away from the camera, directing their sight outside of the frame—"To have them engage with the camera would be an acknowledgment

of place, a point of view that disclosed a 'here' and a 'there'" (Genoni 139). Then the possibility of disturbing the status quo is constantly present but never crossed.

Halfway through the novel, the filmmaker describes himself as "young and blind" (Murnane, *The Plains* 81). At that point, his search for meaning is marked with doubt, or rather a realization. As the passages analyzed above illustrate, the blindness found in *The Plains* manifests itself in hope in the possibility of revealing something hidden in the spatial and the personal spheres. Regarding the spaces/places of the novel, however, a certain pattern emerges—the outside spaces that the characters occupy resist transformation into places despite the characters' emotional consolidation. As for the places, as the interpretation of the bar lounge scene shows, they appear either as interiors sheltered from the view of the plains, or that which is "seen" only from the outside and is unattainable from up close. The relationship between the plains and the filmmaker has the Doppler effect. As he gets closer to the space of the plains, their meaning becomes more elusive and the definition recedes farther away. The filmmaker's effort to capture the plains repeatedly proves futile, hence their existence only as a space of possibility and supposition.

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At the Crossroads of Life and Death: The Body in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020)

Abstract. This article aims to analyze the representation of embodiment in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Exploring the novel's narrative, this paper argues that Emezi employs Igbo spiritual beliefs to dismantle gender taxonomy rooted in the Western episteme. Furthermore, because the novel presents Vivek's existence as deviating from the linear trajectory of human life, the main character's embodied form transcends the notion of materiality. In this light, the main protagonist's departure from life emerges as a form of emancipation from the rigid boundaries of liberal humanist conceptualizations of the body. Following the footsteps of their Nigerian literary predecessors, Emezi portrays life on Earth as a cyclical process, interweaving both the living and the dead. Given the above, Vivek's corporeal death is not presented as a demise, but rather as a step towards imagining a world in which the existence of African queer bodies is not tainted with precariousness.

Keywords: corporeality; Nigerian literature; postcolonial literature; spirituality; queer African body; *The Death of Vivek Oji*

1. Introduction

In a world marked by anti-gay violence, the existence of queer bodies is often precarious, and revealing one's sexual identity may be seen as dicing with death. Such is the case of the main protagonist in Akwaeke Emezi's novel entitled *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). When one day a female named Kavita opens up the door to her house only to find her dead child at her feet, the novel invites its readers to, on the one hand, unravel the mystery of Vivek's death, but also to ponder a more nuanced understanding of the queer African body. Set in southeastern Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative weaves together Vivek's loved ones' endeavours to grapple with his death, but most importantly, it attempts to answer the question, posed by Vivek himself, meaning "If nobody sees you, are you still there?" (Emezi, *The Death* 38).

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2. Fleshing out the History of the Queer African Body

In Nigeria, there are still voices that claim non-heterosexual manifestations of the body as a product of Western modernity which does not align with the traditional experiences of African indigenous cultures. Furthermore, due to the current social and legal climate, the country's non-heterosexual inhabitants confront significant obstacles on a regular basis; Nigeria's judicial system publicly condemns same-sex desire, creating a hostile and dangerous environment for its queer population, driving many to conceal their identities or to seek refuge in more welcoming countries. On top of that, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, passed in 2014, criminalizes not only same-sex marriages but also public demonstrations of affection between same-sex couples and their witnesses, that is, "individuals who are aware of same-sex relationships, including those who run gay clubs and organisations" (Balogun and Bissel 116).

However, regardless of these circumstances, all Africa has a long history of same-sex relationships. As Sylvia Tamale notes, although heterosexuality held prominence as the primary form of sexuality in precolonial Africa, as was the case in other parts of the world, and most communities highly prioritized procreation, there is evidence which suggests that same-sex desire is no stranger to African history. To illustrate this point, Tamale provides an example of the Langi community of northern Uganda, where effeminate males known as "*mudoko dako*" were regarded as females and were allowed to marry other men (35). Additionally, in her groundbreaking study entitled *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Ifi Amadiume argues that in the precolonial society of her hometown in Nniobi, located in southeastern Nigeria, the disconnection between biological sex and ideological gender paved a way for women to assume roles traditionally associated with men or be recognized as 'males' in terms of power and authority and, as a result, they were allowed to marry other women. What is more, she highlights that since these roles were not strictly defined as masculine or feminine, there were no repercussions for such behaviours—"As such roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized, no stigma was attached to breaking gender rules" (Amadiume 185).

Additionally, in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers sets out to differentiate terms such as body and flesh, emphasizing this distinction as a fundamental aspect of assessing positions of subjugation and freedom. According to Spillers, "flesh" precedes the conceptualization of the "body" (67). To put it differently, in the equation of dividing society into fully-fleshed humans and non-humans during the slave trade era, Black flesh was marked as "that zero degree of conceptualization," deprived of any value (67). Furthermore, Spillers argues that anti-blackness gave way to the "ungendering" of Black individuals; she asserts that the Black body was commodified in terms of quantity, transcending gender categorizations, as both female and male identities were treated as dehumanized entities (67). In this light, anti-blackness denied Black body its humanness, reducing Black people to enslaved bodies bereft of gender:

That order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World,

diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this dis-
tance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions,
we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome,* and the female body and the male body become
a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. (67)

Drawing on Spillers' theorization of the ungendering, C. Riley Snorton takes a closer look at the Black
experience from a period predating the present-day gender classification, and he highlights the
enduring historical connection between Black identity and gender mutability. In *Black on Both Sides,*
Snorton examines slave narratives, interpreting acts of fugitivity as a form of gender performance,
where cross-dressing emerges as a "way of seeing fungible flesh as a mode for fugitive action" (12).
In other words, Snorton conceptualizes gender mutability as a site of emancipation, with captive
bodies playing a crucial role in shaping the contemporary discourses of transgender identity—"In
this regard," he continues, "captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as
chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of
being" (57). Thus, assertions that consider contemporary behaviours diverging from conventional
gender norms inconsistent with the essence of Africanness seem devoid of theoretical grounds.
"Such claims," as Tamale points out, "are simply reductionist oversimplifications of extremely
complex human phenomena that are impossible to bind in racialized or ethnicized bodies" (36).

3. The Shift of Queer Narratives in Nigerian Literature

While the first generation of African writers, including Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, allud-
ed to the presence of non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality in their novels, such as
Things Fall Apart and *The Interpreters,* these renderings, according to Lindsey Green-Simss, are
not discernible at first glance—"Soyinka, like Chinua Achebe, gestures toward the presence of
queer love but does not actually bring it into discourse" (140). Furthermore, in his article, Chris
Dunton highlights the reluctance of the first generation of African writers to provide an accurate
representation of gay relationships among Africans. He contends that these representations
would not necessarily have to fall within Western patterns of self-representation. Instead, he
suggests, homosexual encounters in African literature have been met with "outbursts of silence,"
and associating homosexuality with the Western world has contributed to the consolidation of
this silence (Dunton, *'Wheyting'* 448). However, it is worth pointing out that the aforementioned
essay was published in 1989. From that point onward, significant changes and modifications have
taken place in the Nigerian literary scene. With the increased popularity of social media platforms
and an expanding body of Nigerian writing, the views of third-generation Nigerian authors who
publicly oppose anti-homosexual laws are becoming harder to ignore. This phenomenon has
not escaped Dunton's attention; more than two decades after publishing the aforementioned
essay, he notes "as doors are shut and bolted it seems the hammering on those doors gets
louder" (*Tuning into the Polyphony* 5). What is more, Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando
argue that while the African queer body is often marginalized and disregarded, queer activists

and communities in Africa employ a strategy of storytelling to combat the stigma surrounding African queerness; they "reclaim and affirm their embodied existence by sharing the stories of their lives" (129). Although, as Katherine McKittrick points out, the act of sharing these stories of "[B]lack livingness and ways of knowing" may elicit discomfort and fear, such narratives are essential in relieving the deep-seated burdens of historical oppression (*Dear Science and Other Stories* 3). These shared accounts, according to McKittrick, pave the way to confronting the dominant systems of knowledge. "Sharing", she explains, "signals collaboration and collaborative ways to enact and engender struggle" (7). Among those Nigerian literary works which engage in a battle against discrimination targeting sexual minorities in Nigeria, one can distinguish Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2007), Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Romeo Oriogun's poetry collection *Sacrament of Bodies* (2020), Arinze Ifeakandu's *God's Children Are Little Broken Things* (2022), and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Hence, the growing polyphony representing diverse modes of sexual expression in Nigerian literature contributes to breaking down the doors Dunton hints at.

4. The Body in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020)

Born in Nigeria to an Igbo father and Tamil mother, Akwaeke Emezi (they/them) often draws inspiration from their roots, weaving their own biography into their novels. Identifying as a non-binary trans person, the author taps into the liminal spaces and ties their body of writing by common thematic threads, including the multitude of selves, spirituality, and gender fluidity. Their first novel, entitled *Freshwater,* follows the story of the Ada, who occupies the in-between space between the spiritual and the human. As an *ogbanje*, she is inhabited by several spirit entities, each with their own sexual desires that translate into her embodied form. Similarly, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, the main character's sexual preferences encompass both men and women. What is more, Vivek liberates from the strict binary boundaries of male and female; as he grows older, his physical appearance starts to acquire attributes conventionally regarded as feminine despite his family's sceptical attitudes. Instead of trying to conform and fit into the general dichotomous distinction between male and female, Vivek fluctuates between both realms while his gender identity in the novel remains uncategorized. In one interview, Emezi rejects a rigid Western binary, questioning the validity of a singular identity. The author states that the main reason for avoiding Western vocabularies in terms of gender was to prompt readers to consider the credibility of the main protagonist, irrespective of Vivek's physical appearance or chosen pronouns—"No matter what he wore, no matter what pronouns he used, Vivek was Vivek the entire time" (Masters). Furthermore, Vivek does not strive for social acceptance. In the passage that follows, he seems fully at ease with himself, and it soon becomes evident that the only people who find it difficult to accept his sexual expressions are the people who surround him:

I know what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things, ugly words.

Calling them women, as if that's supposed to be ugly too … Less than a man—something disgusting,

something weak and shameful. But if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. ...I was never one to begin with anyway. (Emezi, *The Death* 131)

Insisting on his authentic self-representation, Vivek illustrates an alternative mode of existence that does not bow under the weight of what Sylvia Wynter conceptualizes as "the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human" (260). In her writings, Wynter delves into the origins of Western and colonial knowledge systems, revealing the concealed connections between racial, gender, and sexual identity, and the prevailing regulatory principles that have established, perpetuated, and accepted exclusionary practices. According to Wynter, the invention of and the encounter with the colonial Other contributes to shaping the modern Western way of thinking and its ideas about its own identity. Wynter refers to this preferred identity with the term Western Man, arguing that a dominant view of humanity these days stems from Western ideals such as secularism, rationality, and whiteness. Simultaneously, she does not advocate for contributing to or complacently participating in the dominant knowledge systems. Instead, she engages in what Walter D. Mignolo describes as "epistemic disobedience" (106). As a result, Wynter prompts her readers to consider individuals currently marginalized within the category of Man-as-human. For Wynter, "those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason" offer a fresh perspective on the concept of being human, wherein humanness is defined not as a fixed state but rather a praxis, resisting the essentialist classification rooted in the Western episteme (McKittrick, *Yours in the Intellectual Struggle* 2). Thus, using Katherine McKittick's words, Vivek's fungible state can be described as "the possibility of undoing and unsettling—not replacing or occupying—Western conceptions of what it means to be human" (2). Regardless of numerous attempts to persuade him to adhere to patriarchal gender norms, including placing him in a military school against his will and his family's constant urging to cut his hair, Vivek does not allow these dominant societal beliefs to suppress his desires and he keeps on transgressing gender boundaries by engaging in sexual encounters with men and women. Furthermore, he manifests his alternative mode of inhabiting the world through physical appearance—"placing necklaces against his chest, draping them over his silver chain, clipping his ears with gold earrings, his hair tumbling over his shoulders" (Emezi, *The Death* 71–72). Consequently, shifting the place of peripheral identities to the center of Nigerian literary dialectics, the novel evokes a twofold effect; not only does it resist the idea of homosexuality as something that is un-African and incompatible with traditional customs, but it also opposes the idea of a gender taxonomy anchored in the Western rationale. Simultaneously, the narrative sheds light on the failure of colonial epistemology in grasping what Oluwadunni O. Talabi describes as "the many possibilities of ontology," highlighting how colonial legacies repress gender exuberance "before it even has the opportunity to blossom" (335).

What adds a profound layer to the narrative is Vivek's occupation of both material and spiritual worlds. In the novel, the author draws from Igbo ontology, utilising spirituality as

a means to move beyond rigid binaries and fixed categories of identity. In doing so, Emezi seems to follow the footsteps of their literary predecessors, including Amos Tutola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). As a result, Emezi embeds *The Death of Vivek Oji* in the broader tradition of Nigerian writing. At the very beginning of the novel, it is revealed that Vivek was born around the time of his grandmother's passing; she died of a heart attack with "her heart seizing at the threshold of her house", the same threshold at which Kavita finds the body of her dead child—"on their front veranda, under four yards of akwete material … the back of his skull was broken and seeping into her welcome mat" (Emezi, *The Death* 12). What is more, well before Vivek's birth, Ahunna sustained a foot injury while tending to her farm. The incident leaves her with a distinctive mark on her body—"a dark brown patch shaped like a limp starfish" (5). Remarkably, the same scar is also present on Vivek's foot from the day he is born—"a soft starfish, colored in deep brown" (12). Despite never having the chance to meet and occupying different temporalities, Ahunna and Vivek share a distinctive physical trait that unfolds a deeper connection between the two of them. This prompts the reader to consider Vivek as the reincarnated spirit of his grandmother. Unfortunately, his father refuses to accept this possibility due to Vivek's gender assigned to him at birth:

> He did know. How else could that scar have entered the world of flesh if it had not left in the first place. A thing cannot be in two places at once. But still, he denied this for many years for as long as he could. Superstition, he said. It was a coincidence, the marks on their feet—and besides, Vivek was a boy, not a girl, so how can? (13)

However, interpreting Vivek as an embodiment of his grandmother's spirit seems to appear in line with traditional Igbo cosmology, in which death is viewed as a passage to an existence beyond the present one, meaning that "life continues in another form after corporeal death" (Igbo and Ayika 94). Because the entanglement of spiritual and material dimensions is what lies at the core of most traditional African customs, Vivek's perception of reality "is not limited to that which one sees and touches" (Okwu 19). In other words, through Vivek's character, Emezi blurs the rigid divisions between human/non-human, male/female, material/spiritual, as well as between life and death, as indicated by chapters narrated by Vivek from beyond the grave. This framework, in contrast to the conceptualisation of linear time, suggests a cyclical trajectory of human life. Tapping into the wisdom of indigenous knowledges, Emezi utilizes Vivek's character to bridge the gap between past, present, and future. As suggested by M. Jacqui Alexander, according to African cosmologies, spirit energy navigates time in a manner that does not conform to our usual understanding of a linear progression, meaning that "there is no distance between space and time that it is unable to navigate" (309). Therefore, the concept of time strictly moving in a linear fashion is not accurate in Vivek's case, as his energy operates outside human understanding. This perspective gains further support later in the novel when Vivek recounts his dream to Osita. In this dream, he witnesses himself in the mirror, with his reflection taking on the form of Ahunna:

> "I dreamt that I was our grandmother," I [Vivek] tell him. "I looked in a mirror and she was there, just like the pictures, and she spoke to me in Igbo." "What did she say?" "*Hold my life for me*." (160)

Furthermore, in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Alexander elaborates on the selective acceptance of the sacred in postmodern consciousness, where Christianity is identified with good tradition, while other traditions are cast aside as inferior. The cosmologies rooted in Africa, she explains, are frequently subordinated to the framework informed by Eurocentric perspectives, with their significance negated in the formation of modern categories of identity. As a result, these indigenous knowledges cannot be utilized in comprehending the construction and development of self or in the restructuring of the primary categories that transnational feminism grapples with. "And yet," as she suggests, "some of its most formative categories—migration, gender and sexuality, experience, home, history, and memory—can be made intelligible within these very systems" (Alexander 324). Thus, Emezi draws from indigenous African spiritual beliefs and, as a result, rejects the long-standing history of Western philosophy in which those categorized as 'different' have often been perceived as "the embodied", driven by instinct and emotion, with reason deemed beyond their capabilities (Oyewumi 3). In doing so, the author delves into "border gnosis", which Mignolo elucidates as the ways of sensing and knowing obtained through residing in colonial borderlands (11). Border thinking, as Mignolo argues, challenges the inclination of colonial endeavours to regulate the production of knowledge and emerges as an interplay of "the body-politics of knowing, thinking, and doing" which stem from "the bodies who dwell and think in the borders" (XX). This leads to a shift in understanding where, rephrasing Toni Morrison's words which Emezi often describes as formative in their writing, Emezi unfolds the epistemic margins and encourages the world to shift its focus to their position—"All I needed to do was stand exactly where I was, name that the center, and refuse to move" ("This Letter Isn't For You").

While Kavita feels she holds the strongest connection to Vivek as his mother, she takes on the role of the novel's investigator. But it is Vivek's cousin, Osita, who serves as one of the most important witnesses in the story. Since the two cousins share a strong bond from a young age, Osita often finds solace in Chika and Kavita's home, seeing it as an escape from the strict atmosphere imposed by his conservative Christian mother, Mary, back in Owerri. When they grow into teenagers, Osita and Vivek use a secluded bungalow as a safe space to express themselves and break free from parental supervision. But this alleged freedom of expression exists merely on the surface level. In fact, it is Osita's limits of comfort that dictate the degree of Vivek's self-expression. When one day Vivek asks Osita if he can observe through the window as he engages in a sexual encounter with a girl named Elizabeth, Osita is initially taken aback by this request. Eventually, he agrees, citing their comradeship as men who enjoy showing off their sexual capabilities—"We were men together and we liked to show off, so I agreed" (Emezi, *The Death* 33). However, when Elizabeth catches sight of Vivek in the doorway, Osita reacts with immediate rage and, as a result, Vivek's body becomes the object of Osita's violent outburst, regardless

of Vivek's ongoing blackout episode—"I was tired of him being sick or strange or whatever was wrong with him" (36). When the cousins meet a couple of years after this incident, Osita is surprised by Vivek's long hair and tremendous weight loss. Although, at first, he is concerned for Vivek's well-being, he soon admits that Vivek's physical alteration makes him feel uncomfortable:

> My hands brushed against the tangle of his hair as we pulled apart. It felt soft. I stepped away from him and wiped my hands on my shorts. Vivek kept looking at me, but I couldn't meet his gaze directly. He was stranger than I was admitting to either of us, and it made me feel uncomfortable. (59)

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*, Sara Ahmed elucidates how the figure of a stranger is not someone whom we have not yet encountered, but someone whom we already recognize, someone who is already familiar in their unfamiliarity. In other words, there are methods which enable us to distinguish between unfamiliar individuals and those who are part of a specific environment. These techniques, as Ahmed suggests, "involve ways of reading the bodies of others we come to face" (21). In this context, strangers are not just individuals foreign to a particular setting; they are those who, by their close presence, are "*already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place" (20). In the case of Vivek, this becomes even more pronounced when his family members compare his changed appearance to "a madman" or "a masquerade" (Emezi, *The Death* 57). Additionally, as Ahmed points out, strange bodies serve as the boundary defining a space where the familiar body, unmarked by strangeness, cannot go, and where the strange body establishes itself as at home. Furthermore, the process of constructing the body of a stranger entangles both assimilation and rejection, moving between interior and exterior, suggesting that the strange body has already affected the surface of the alleged body-at-home. The alteration of the familiar body-at-home boundaries occurs through affective gestures. These gestures, in turn, make it easier to withdraw from cohabiting with strangers in a specific social environment; "The withdrawal," as Ahmed elucidates, "remains registered on the skin, on the border that feels" (*Strange Encounters* 51). This particular reaction is encapsulated in Osita's behavior; first of all, after touching Vivek's hair, he rubs his hands off on his shorts and avoids Vivek's gaze, and then he uses a bucket of water to scrub his skin to wash away any imprints of touch between the two of them, "trying to get rid of the unsettled feeling" that permeates him (Emezi, *The Death* 59).

Osita's discomfort intensifies when Vivek suspects Osita of having a boyfriend at university. Exclaiming he is not like Vivek or any of his male friends, Osita remarks that Vivek's physical appearance mirrors features traditionally associated with females, and accuses him of "knacking men" (67). And yet, to his surprise, Osita is confronted with Vivek questioning his cousin's fear of something simply because it deviates from the norm. With arms folded, Vivek props himself against the headboard of the bed and expresses disappointment with Osita, expecting a more open minded approach from him—"I'm disappointed, bhai. I didn't think you'd be one of those

close-minded people. Leave that for your mother" (68). This statement foregrounds how the masculine ideals and conservative Christian values induced by Osita's mother play a crucial role in his ambivalent attitude towards Vivek. When, after Vivek's death, Osita ponders the time when he condemned Vivek for decorating his body with Kavita's jewellery, his remorse indicates his simultaneous attraction and apprehension of the unsettling reality of his non-conventional desires—"Osita wished, much later, that he'd told Vivek the truth then, that he was so beautiful he made the air around him dull, made Osita hard with desire" (68). Therefore, it soon becomes evident that Osita's conflicted feelings towards Vivek escalate when Vivek's physical appearance becomes an additional factor constitutive of his queerness, especially if one takes into account the novel's socio-political setting.

Throughout *The Death of Vivek Oji*, readers get glimpses of the Nigerian political landscape, following the death of dictator Sani Abacha, with people rioting in the streets and tensions frequently turning into violent fights over ideological differences—"voices were raised, blows were thrown, and the violence sometimes escalated into bloody clashes on the roads" (91). This socio-political context allows Vivek's family to assume his susceptibility to external violence. Fearing that the mobs flooding the streets where "death entered with upcoming elections" might take a toll on Vivek's life, his relatives attempt to protect him by limiting his spatial movements to a safe space of their house (91). First of all, his parents bring him back home from university and subject him to constant supervision. His outcry, "You are keeping me in a cage!" articulates his frustration at being kept in an enclosed space as if he were a prisoner (92). This arrangement also provides Kavita with the opportunity to address Vivek's mental health struggles, using the resources she has at hand. First of all, she takes her child to a doctor who fails to identify any medical issues, although Vivek struggles with lack of sleep and loss of appetite. As a last resort, Kavita, unaware of the nature of the process, allows Mary, her sister-in-law, to take Vivek to her church for deliverance after Mary insists:

> "I know it's hard to hear," Mary said, softening her voice. "But you know how these men are. The boy is slim, he has long hair— all it takes is one idiot thinking he's a woman from behind or something, then getting angry when he finds out that he's not. Because, if he's a boy, then what does it mean that the idiot is attracted to him? ... You're his mother. It's your job to protect him. I'm telling you, bring him to Owerri. We can help him at the church here." (71–72)

Alas, to Kavita's astonishment, Vivek comes back from church in a much-deteriorated condition. While Kavita tries to find out what happened, Vivek eventually reveals that the incident in question involved physical abuse inflicted by individuals who thought of him as possessed by an evil spirit. These people, Vivek claims, "had to beat it out", leaving "a swath of dark red welts on his side" (75). This event marks a pivotal point where Vivek departs from his family even further—"Don't touch me," he continues, "stop trying to fix me" (75).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Ahmed illustrates how, when confronted with the societal norms of heterosexuality, queer individuals may experience discomfort as their bodies do not seamlessly blend into a pre-established schema; "the sense of out-of-place-ness and estrangement involves an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears as surface when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some bodies, and not others" (148). This discomfort manifests as a feeling of disorientation, where one's body seems "out of place, awkward, and unsettled" (148). The following passage illustrates how this alienation translates into Vivek's bodily symptoms

> [H]eaviness found me and I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't shake it off; I couldn't transform it, evaporate or melt it. It was distinct from me, but it hooked itself into my body like a parasite. I couldn't figure out if something was wrong with me or if this was just my life— if this was just how people felt, like concrete was dragging their flesh off their bones. (Emezi, *The Death* 89–90)

Additionally, as Ahmed suggests, queer people might be asked not to make heterosexual individuals uncomfortable by refraining from openly exhibiting gestures of intimacy that do not follow heterosexual norms. This request, however, contributes to an uncomfortable experience, imposing limitations on the ways queer individuals may interact with their own bodies and the bodies of others within social settings. While his family members dread the possibility that Vivek might fall victim to a public lynching, they attempt to conceal his ambivalent gender expressions, preventing his figure from entering the public space. However, as Ahmed writes, the domain of normative gender expressions is only suitable for "those who can inhabit it" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 147). This, in turn, entices Vivek to engage in acts of transgression to break free from the limitations of "an uneven block, chipping and sparking on the hard ground, tearing off into painful chunks" (Emezi, *The Death* 89). And while, to a certain degree, it holds true that the community of Nigerwives and Vivek's circle of friends—Juju, Elizabeth, Olunne and Somto—provide Vivek with a relatively safe space that allows him to more fully develop his gender expressions, including his shaved legs/chest, braided hair and red-painted toenails, this comfort zone soon becomes too confined to accommodate Vivek's body in its full form. Afraid of the outside world, where precarious bodies that do not fit into the gender binary are framed as "degenerate and killable," Osita seeks to protect Vivek's life by implying he should not leave Juju's house (Snorton and Haritaworn 67). In Osita's view, "[e]verything would have stayed okay if he hadn't left the bubble. If he hadn't felt the need to start going outside and putting himself at risk" (Emezi, *The Death* 232). But, as shown later on in the story, Vivek's death is much more nuanced, and attributing it to a matter of hate crime/sexual discrimination would be an oversimplification.

Although the opening sentence, "[t]hey burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died," might lead its readers to suspect Vivek became the subject of a collective violent outburst, at the end of the novel, Osita discloses that Vivek's demise is tied to more ambiguous factors (1).

When he spots Vivek, clad in a dress, in the marketplace, Osita attempts to drive him forcefully back to Juju's house. Nevertheless, Vivek does not comply with Osita's wishes and insists on being referred to as Nnemedi, an Igbo name which would have cemented his connection to Ahunna if only the name was not denied to him at birth—"It's not a common name," Vivek's uncle explains, "but it was for Mama. Because they had the same scar on their feet. But Chika didn't agree. If Vivek had been a girl, maybe he would have agreed" (222). Consequently, fearing "[w]hat would happen if someone looked too closely at her, someone holding a machete and buffeted by a mob," Osita drags Nnemedi by her arm to place her in a secure location against her will (235). In response, Nnnemedi, wounded by Osita's evident embarrassment, strives to liberate herself from his hold, accusing him of hypocrisy—"'You're ashamed of me,' she said, her voice surprised. 'That's why you don't like me going out like this. It's like you're always ashamed, Osita. First, of yourself, then of us, now of me'" (235). As a consequence, Nnemedi uses all her physical strength to break free from Osita's grasp, and Osita's shame becomes a driving force that puts an end to Nnemedi's life:

> She pulled herself with such force that she stumbled, and her heel caught on a stone, and she fell. It happened so fast. I saw her head strike the raised cement edge of the gutter at the side of the road. I saw her body slump, eyes closed, blood pooling into the sand within seconds. (235)

In Achille Mbembe's conceptualisation of *necropolitics*, sovereignty plays a crucial role in defining which bodies are considered significant and which ones can be disregarded—"In this case," Mbembe suggests, "sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (80). When it comes to those bodies cast as disposable, their physical structure places them within indistinct and undifferentiated entities and reduces them to "simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities" (36). Building on Mbembe's theory, Jasbir K. Puar introduces the term *queer necropolitics*, criticising the pernicious assumption that "the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight" (32). This misconception, as Puar explains, excludes individuals of colour who diverge from heteronormative norms, deeming them as a marginalized population with a precarious future marked by social, political, or literal death. This perception gains particular confirmation in the following words of Vivek/Nnemedi—"I knew I was dancing with death every day," the main protagonist explains, "especially when I walked outside like that" (Emezi, *The Death* 244). Because Vivek/Nnemedi's expressions of the body do not fit into the rigid gender dichotomy, it seems that the perpetuation of such ideas which disparage certain bodies as not worthy of mourning allows Osita to conceal the traces of his entanglement in Vivek/Nnemedi's death and dispose of the dead body of his loved one, placing it by the welcome mat of her house only to flee the scene shortly after.

Although Vivek/Nnemedi's friends initially want to keep their word given to their friend and prevent his/her parents from discovering the truth about their child's alternative mode of

existence, Kavita's detective pursuits finally help her form a genuine picture of her offspring. When she insists her child's friends reveal the truth, they disclose that Vivek wanted to be referred to with he/she pronouns; they recall—"Sometimes he asked us to call him by another name; he said we could refer to him as either she or he, that he was both" (217). In the context of Vivek/Nnemedi's existence, the notion of anthroponymy is important insofar as names, in Igbo ontology, consistently mirror indigenous perceptions of space, time, and the divine. As Michael C. Mbabuike suggests, these names might be related to the *ogbanje*, express acknowledgement and appreciation to the gods for their blessings, or represent the rebirth of a deceased ancestor. Therefore, Igbo anthroponyms are "actual persons rendered in words and sound. To exist without a name for the Igbo people is to be faceless" (Mbabuike 47).

Taking that into account, one might suggest that Vivek was stripped of his identity before he even passed away—"I am homeless," he confides in Osita at one point in the novel (Emezi, *The Death* 58). When Vivek admits that he has no place to call home, it prompts one to consider whether this homelessness is a consequence of Vivek/Nnemedi's inability to reproduce the heteronormative ideal. This, however, might lead to an assumption that the overarching objective of queerness is to strive for acceptance at the core of societal norms. In the case of Vivek/Nnemedi, nothing could be farther from the truth; in fact, the home in question refers to an acknowledgement of Vivek/Nnemedi's alternative mode of being in the world. As Emezi suggests in one interview, although an individual's personal experiences might revolve around their subjective reality, this subjectivity does not diminish the legitimacy of other realities. However, as Emezi contends, the majority of the violence prevalent in our world today often arises from individuals attempting to establish their own reality as dominant, disregarding the alternative modes of existence—"the best way to make sure that someone's reality doesn't exist is to make sure the person doesn't exist" (Shapiro). Furthermore, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler sheds light on the link between grievability and violence. She argues that there is a distinction in society between lives that are considered worthy of mourning and those that are not. This unequal distribution of grief reflects societal norms about which bodies deserve to be recognized as human or, using Butler's words, "what counts as a livable life and a grievable death" (XV). The question of whether Vivek/Nnemedi is deemed worthy of mourning comes to the forefront when Kavita begins to realize that, as parents, she and Chika failed to recognize their child's true identity—"*If he had been a girl…*" Kavita ponders, "[w]hat did it mean now? And he had ended up a girl anyway, with the name they had denied him" (Emezi, *The Death* 222). Furthermore, although Kavita initially deems her child's alternative mode of existence as "unnatural," she gradually begins to acknowledge the diverse realities intertwined within her child's identity (217). Consequently, she insists on changing the inscription on their child's tombstone to one that reads "VIVEK NNEMEDI OJI. BELOVED CHILD" (242). In doing so, she makes room for hope in envisioning a different world, that kind of hope which might reshape the narratives surrounding gendered expression. As Snorton suggests, the flexibility inherent in hope, similarly to the psychological aspects of grief, enables the assertion

of claims about corporeality that surpass discussions focused on materiality—"It allows for the possibility of transition, which does not occur on the surgeon's table at the clinic but instead in the spaces where people come together or in the quiet moments of reflection in one's room" ('A New Hope' 90). This theme of hope emerging from contemplation is further invoked when Osita visits Vivek/Nnemedi's grave on his cousin's birthday, and he ponders Vivek/Nnemedi's deceased body as a source of vitality, giving life to other creatures—"giving life to things after he'd run out of it himself" (Emezi, *The Death* 230). Therefore, contrary to the negative discourse which paints death as haunting human life, *The Death of Vivek Oji* portrays departure from life as, on the one hand, a new beginning and, on the other, a form of liberation from the constraints of liberal humanist conceptualizations of the body, for Vivek/Nnemedi dies in their most authentic form, "in the arms of the one who loved me [Vivek/Nnemedi] the most, wearing a skin that was true" (244).

5. Conclusions

In *Return to My Native Land,* Aimé Césaire claims that the end of the world is "the only thing that's worth beginning" (39). Seen in this light, the death of Vivek/Nnemedi can be perceived as a step towards annihilation of the world where Western theories define which bodies can be deemed as human. Weaving indigenous cosmologies into the novel's fabric, Emezi dismantles binary oppositions of identity and presents Vivek/Nnemedi's alternative mode of existence which goes beyond materiality. In this sense, the portrayal of Vivek/Nnemedi's body indicates a forward-thinking and transformative perspective on African queerness and emerges as what José Esteban Muñoz describes as the "warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (1). Concluding the novel with the words, "Somewhere, you see, in the river of time, I am already alive" (Emezi, *The Death* 245), Vivek/Nnemedi's character re-surfaces from corporeal death as a modality of a "*then and there*" (Muñoz 1) of queer African futures, marking a new paradigm of the queer African body.

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Review of *Ecocriticism and Asian American Literature: Gold Mountains, Weedflowers and Murky Globes* by Begoña Simal-González, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; XV, 273 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-35618-7

The environmental humanities has been carving out more and more analytical space, especially in the field of literary criticism, with a focus on its rhetorical dynamics and tensions within human and non-human relationships in the contemporary world. An environmental dimension also helps to negotiate and investigate certain sociocultural concerns and contexts within the boundaries of space and nature, with their mutual impact on both representation and interpretation of these relations through a lens of critical theory. *Ecocriticism and Asian American Literature: Gold Mountains, Weedflowers and Murky Globes* bridges environmental thought and the ecocritical potential of Asian American literary works, at the same time breaking the nature/culture dichotomy, which has proliferated to a considerable extent over the past few decades, and seems to be deeply rooted in essentialist modes of reasoning. Begoña Simal-González deftly navigates through uncharted waters of ecocritical thinking, and takes the readers on a journey which will leave them wonderstruck and inspired to search for their own path of eco-interpretation in the realm of literary works.

The volume constitutes the book series: "Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment" devoted to exploring environmental concerns in cultural and sociohistorical contexts. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and a springboard for surveying the field of ecocriticism, where the author promises to fill in the theoretical void of ecocritical study and aims at "re-engaging Asian American literature with the new navigational tools of ecocriticism" (2). Simal-González fulfills this promise

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in full measure, since her ecocritical lens helps to reinterpret and reinvent new perspectives on a close reading of Asian American literary works. The selection of literary works is impressive as well, as it spans a period of over a century, from Edith Eaton's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) to Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). By exploring a variety of disparate texts, the author addresses a wide range of environmental issues and guides the reader across a turf of apparently tangled theoretical conceptualizations. The term 'turf' does not appear here accidentally. A useful property of a turf allows for lifting it and planting elsewhere in order to make a deeply-rooted lawn. Similarly to this process, ecocritical tools offered by Simal-González enable the reader to 'replant' critical theories anew and tailor them to the particular characteristics of the analyzed writings. In this introductory chapter, the author also draws our attention to the fact that for a long time environmental ecocritics had eluded an analysis of the already strained relationship between race and nature. Regardless of her own apprehension before handling this issue, Simal-González admits that "environmental criticism proved an excellent plow and the Asian American texts turned out to be far more fertile than expected" (2).

With this in mind, the author devotes Chapter 2 to the analysis of the first-contact narratives with their focus on the environment and its natural properties, where she successfully attempts to draw parallels between the characters' first-contact experiences of America. Simal-González juxtaposes the narratives of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) to reveal disparate renditions of the father figure. Moreover, the analysis of the figurative use of the terms 'fog' and 'foggy' through the veil of poems, helps to notice the same sense of confusion and disorientation among immigrants on the new continent as depicted in Kingston's work. The motif of fog is also conspicuous in Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991), where it intermingles with the artificial, human-made environment of monumental New York. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) is another example of fascination with a technological landscape of human-made artifacts. Simal-González emphasizes the fact that such a landscape eventually turns out to be a toxic one, as it builds up a somber, post-pastoral—almost apocalyptic—vision of the human era and, as a result, is a harbinger of "a new, transnatural nature" (38).

Chapter 3 focuses on the first Chinese American writer, Edith Eaton, and her criticism concerning the widespread animalization of Chinese Americans as an overt token of their denied humanity. Especially conspicuous throughout the nineteenth century, racial nativism among white Americans contributed to forging the non-assimilationist paradigm, which prevented Asian American communities from merging into American society and stained them with a widespread prejudice that "the inscrutable Chinese (American) would remain an inassimilable Other" (45) for the rest of their lives. Simal-González also employs a historical lens to analyze the problem of naturalization in the United States and points to the fact that "Asian Americans have historically been 'naturalized as an other in America'" (47), as American legislation denied them equal rights and opportunities from the very beginning of their settlement. The author aptly argues that the trope of animalization deprived racialized others of their human dignity and—through animalizing strategies—rendered them non-human, vermin-like and tantamount to the Yellow

Peril. An anti-Chinese mindset, predominant in nineteenth-century America, evinced itself in Orientalism and sinophobia, which was concomitant with the fact that "Chinese people were regarded either as objects of exotic curiosity ('pets') or as potential threats ('pests')" (50) respectively. Edith Eaton, under the pseudonym of Sui Sin Far, attempted to break the simplistic stereotypes of the Chinese. The anti-miscegenation laws, prevailing in the United States at the time, did not make this task any easier, since the persistent perception of the immigrants as a potential threat to American society, perpetuated existing stereotypes and precluded discarding the pet/pest binary. Simal-González succeeds in depicting "how 'nature' has been used to subjugate and marginalize racialized others" (76), proving that "Eaton's work contributed to dismantling the racist animalization of Chinese Americans" (14).

In Chapter 4, Simal-González undertakes an ecocritical reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) and Shawn Wong's *Homebase* (1979) through the prism of a cultural-nationalist project that voices claiming America for Asian Americans. For this purpose, the author employs two ecocritical tools: "the concept of land empathy and a process of land incorporation" (14). The aforementioned works are scrutinized in the light of literary conventions such as (post-)pastoralism and the prevailing discourse— cultural nationalism. The term "inlanding," which Simal-González coins for the purpose of this study, refers to "the voluntary or involuntary incorporation of human bodies into natural landscapes, especially those construed as 'unspoiled'" (102), which neatly inscribes into the analyzed immigrant narratives. In the process of inlanding, human form no longer melts into the landscape but gains its own visibility.

Japanese American literature assumes a different frame of reference due to its high saturation with post-internment trauma and resulting ramifications for the Japanese and Japanese Americans after the Pearl Harbor attack. The mass incarceration of over a hundred thousand people of Japanese descent reverberates in numerous testimonies of the Nisei—the immediate descendants of Japanese immigrants, who—apart from fighting prejudice and discrimination from the hands of American society—also struggle with their hybrid identities. Their literary works are abundant in references to nature and how the internees, especially the first generation of Japanese immigrants—the Issei, find solace in nature and attempt to adapt to adverse environmental conditions by means of small-scale landscaping, ornamental gardening and cultivating their own vegetables. Such a horticultural therapy becomes a tool of emotional healing for numerous inmates. In Chapter 5, devoted to Japanese American literature, Simal-González applies the theoretical lenses of biopolitics and material ecocriticism to examine four literary works: Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Perry Miyake's *21st Century Manzanar* (2002) and Cynthia Kadohata's *Weedflower* (2008). In her analysis, two types of interaction come to the foreground within the camp perimeters: herding the internees into former holding pens and horse stables ("animalization") along with extreme temperatures and dust storms, which made it difficult to adapt to such an arid desert habitat ("environment shock"). Simal-González also employs the biopolitical *campo* paradigm, theorized by Giorgio Agamben, in order to trace the agency of the internees

and their gradual transformation from the *homo sacer*, where "Americans of Japanese ancestry became (…) the individuals that could be dispensed with for the sake of the nation, regardless of their loyalty and citizenship" (153), into *homo agricola* and finally into *homo ecologicus*. Thus, the author nails her point that "the paradigm of traditional agrarianism, with its goal of 'taming' nature, was initially the prevalent one in concentration camps" (169).

Chapter 6 is committed to the analysis of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) and Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998), *All Over Creation* (2003) and *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), which depart from conventional Asian American narratives. The phenomenon of globalization that they deal with testifies to recent transnational and transnatural paradigm shifts in ecocriticism. Yamashita, revealing "the anthropogenic ecosystem of the jungle junkyard" (223) in the heart of the Amazonian rainforest, testifies to the notion that the nature/culture dichotomy has long ceased to exist and what we are currently witnessing is the constant entanglement of the human-nature relationship, where the artificial (plastic) environment has already blended into pristine nature. As an example of post-pastoral fiction, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* navigates—by means of blurring the distinction between the natural and the artificial—towards criticizing human greed and urges everyone "to denounce the ease with which human beings naturalize what is artificial" (228). Ozeki's novels, marked with a feminist tinge, are especially amenable to an ecocritical reading, since they push the boundaries of traditional eco-thinking and encourage to adopt a broader theoretical perspective. For that matter, Simal-González successfully demonstrates "how Ozeki's particular handling of different time-space paradigms … allows her to reconcile materiality with immateriality" (215) and what consequences it holds for an ecocritical interpretation. Although every novel assumes a different eco-perspective (*My Year of Meats* focusing on the meat industry and domestic violence, *All Over Creation*—on genetically modified organisms, and *A Tale for the Time Being*—on metaphysical matters), Ozeki's works demonstrate that resistance to detrimental practices, when applied judiciously, can curb toxic discourse and contribute to a better understanding of "global interdependence, indeterminacy, and the interaction of matter and consciousness" (235).

Even though—out of necessity—the selection of prose narratives has been narrowed down mostly to Chinese American and Japanese American literary works (and appears as the only limitation in this monograph), it has not prevented Begoña Simal-González from addressing issues relevant to ecocritical discourse. The ecocritical journey across first-contact narratives, racial nativism rampant in the nineteenth century, the mass internment of the Japanese and Japanese Americans in the 1940s, and finally, new currents in Asian American literature since the 1990s showcases that a cross-pollination of conventional and novel ecocritical approaches proves fruitful for innovative insights and drawing new lines of demarcation within the contemporary ecocritical paradigm.

<p style="text-align:center">✳✳✳</p>

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska (PhD, Faculty of Philology, University of Białystok, Poland) dedicates her research work to the relationship of literature and culture by exploring their textual intersections and mapping their locus within the matrix of the contemporary literary criticism. Her major fields of academic interest comprise ecocriticism, postcolonial and cultural studies with a focus on ethnicity and identity formation in the context of immigrant narratives.

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Review of *Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature* by Matthias Klestil, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 307 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-82102-9

Andrew C. Isenberg observed that "since 1988 there has been a burgeoning of subfields of environmental studies, each with its own methodologies and disciplinary perspectives" (5). Nowadays, more than ever, literary studies look at how works of literature represent and intersect with various notions connected with the environment. Environmental humanities is an ever-growing field and Matthias Klestil adds to it with his book *Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature*, which was published in 2023 by Palgrave Macmillan in their series "Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment."

Researchers have studied the link between environmental knowledge and African Americans prior to Klestil's publication. For example, Thomas G. Andrews points out that not only Mart Stewart but also "[s]everal other scholars have … traced enduring connections between African Americans' environmental knowledge and their struggles to create and preserve spaces of autonomy and resistance" (434). However, numerous scholars focused on historical perspectives. As Klestil focuses on (fiction and non-fiction) literature, his examination is a significant contribution to the intersection of ecocriticism and African American literary studies.

The book comprises an extensive introduction, parts I and II, each consisting of three chapters, and conclusions. The introduction (which is also chapter 1) begins with the analysis of Frederick Douglass's writing, a choice that could confuse some of the readers as Klestil does not provide any context for the analysis before he examines the text; thus, readers are left in the dark as to the goal of the presented observations. Nevertheless, the exploration of Douglass's encounter with Niagara Falls illustrates the interweaving of personal experience with broader ecological concerns and, thus, showcases the importance of race and historical

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trauma in shaping environmental consciousness. The introduction opens the book by discussing the manner in which African American literature has been historically excluded from mainstream ecocriticism. The author challenges the notion that the African American literary tradition lacks environmental engagement, and he illustrates that Black American authors have expressed a form of environmental knowledge that was often fundamentally shaped by racial oppression and history. Klestil frames the book's methodology around ecocriticism, Foucauldian environmental knowledge, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifyin(g)," and African American literary theory. The aims and the uniqueness of the approach are stated and restated multiple times throughout the introduction, which seems excessive and can lead the reader to question why the author feels the need to constantly reestablish the fact that his research differs from other publications: should it not be the case that readers arrive at their own conclusions and are not such insistently guided towards them by the author?

Chapter 2 (first in Part I: "Foundations—Antebellum African American Environmental Knowledge") conceptualizes the Underground Railroad as a literary heterotopia. This chapter focuses on analyzing texts by Solomon Bayley, James Curry, Henry Bibb, Henry Box Brown, John Brown, and Frederick Douglass. The author argues that the Underground Railroad can be perceived not only as a literal escape route but also as a symbolic space that allowed African Americans to reclaim their agency over nature. The presented arguments are clear and provide new insight into the selected texts; however, the author makes claims without providing the reader with textual evidence. The conducted analysis seems to be based only on one or two quotes from each of the texts, thus making it not as convincing as it could be if the author provided further context and multiple quotations supporting his claims. Although intriguing, the assertions are not sufficiently supported by quotes and excerpts from the primary sources; therefore, this may suggest to the reader that the scale on which nature plays a role in the narratives is exaggerated. Similar problem is visible in the following chapters in part I, but the lack of textual evidence seems to be the most jarring in chapter 2. In chapter 3, the author turns to the pastoral mode, introduces the concept of a "strategic pastoral," and explores visual regimes in the antebellum United States by examining fugitive slave narratives, mainly by Frederick Douglass and Henry Box Brown. Klestil shows how African American self-representation shifted from objective to subjective vision in the 19th century. Chapter 4 focuses on African American pamphleteers such as David Walker, Hosea Easton, John Lewis, and William Whipper, who in their works argued against the pseudo-scientific racialization of the Black body. The author examines how the pamphleteers countered the narrative of white scientists who claimed the inferiority of Black Americans and that they were inherently suited to their role as laborers and lacked the qualities necessary for intellectual work. Klestil presents the rhetorical strategies of "dissecting and environmentalizing" the Black body (dismantling racist scientific arguments by showing that the bodily differences were superficial) and reinterpreting "nature" (redefining the natural world as a space of equality not based on racial hierarchy) used by the pamphlet writers.

Part II "Transformations—African American Environmental Knowledge from Reconstruction to Modernity" begins with chapter 5. Klestil examines post-Emancipation African American texts, particularly the journals of Charlotte L. Forten and William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home* (1880). Chapter 5 explores how Forten presents nature as a multilayered refuge and explores themes of home and education in its context. Klestil observes that although "*My Southern Home* can be read as a negotiation of the same major themes found in Forten's writings[,] .... [it] is at the same time a political manifesto that lays out Brown's vision for a post-Emancipation literary engagement with the slavery-past" (193-194). The author examines how Brown presents the postbellum South as a site of oppression as well as opportunity and shows the ways in which African Americans renegotiated their relationship to land. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of Booker T. Washington's autobiographies: *Up from Slavery* (1901) and *Working with the Hands* (1904) in relation to pastoral and georgic traditions. Klestil argues that Washington's vision of Black progress required a transformed environmental knowledge. According to Klestil, Washington saw labor and land cultivation as key to racial uplift; he blended pastoral and georgic traditions in a manner that resonated with but also defied mainstream environmental discourse. Chapter 7 examines Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius stories, which, as the analysis illustrates, subvert dominant environmental narratives by reinterpreting environmental and racial politics through trickster figures and illustrating Black ingenuity in engaging with land and nature despite systemic oppression. Klestil also employs Foucauldian analysis to demonstrate the ways in which Chesnutt's stories critique racialized management of bodies and landscapes. The concluding section of the book (chapter 8) presents a reflective analysis on how assumptions about Black engagement with nature persist in public discourse by discussing Barack Obama's 2009 visit to Yellowstone as a case study. The author advocates for a broader, more inclusive framework in which "African American studies and ecocriticism ... interlink more thoroughly" (287).

One of the book's strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach. Klestil skillfully implements theories from environmental studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies to create a portrayal of how environmental themes are engaged with and responded to in African American literature. His examination draws on a rich tapestry of literary works that provides a comprehensive overview highlighting the evolution of environmental discourse in African American texts. However, occasionally, the breadth of the inquiry may overshadow its depth. Even though Klestil references a vast array of texts, the analysis seems to only skim the surface. Thus, a more limited selection of texts could have yielded a more in-depth exploration showcasing their environmental and racial dimensions. The formatting and structure of the book could also be improved. Despite the fact that chapters are thematically organized and every section of the book reflects the main theme of environmental knowledge, transitions between sections sometimes feel abrupt, which leads to a disjointed reading experience. The thoroughness of the author's research is undeniable; the gathered bibliography and extensive notes not only strengthen the arguments Klestil makes but also provide a rich avenue for further explorations into the presented notions. However, the decision to situate separate bibliographies after each of the chapters could be questioned.

On the one hand, readers easily can find sources the author referred to in the specific chapter, but on the other, some of the bibliographic entries are repeated in multiple bibliographies thus creating an impression of a more extensive list of sources than would be listed if the book had only one bibliography. Moreover, some footnotes provide further explanations and expand the discussed idea, thus are vital to the argumentation the author presents in the main text and make it more persuasive; therefore, they would be advantageous there and not as a footnote (for example, footnotes number 21 and 22 in chapter 2 or footnote number 9 in chapter 3). The use of a wide range of sources is commendable; however, there are instances where the attribution of quotes to their respective sources lacks clarity. One of the more notable examples of the problematic manner of quoting is page 183, where the author references the work (or works—it is unclear) of Charlotte L. Forten. Although the bibliography for chapter 5 contains multiple works by her, on page 183, the author provides quotes without distinguishing which text he refers to.

Matthias Klestil's *Environmental Knowledge, Race, and African American Literature* is a significant contribution to African American literary criticism. The book illuminates the important link between race, literature, and environmental thought, which can encourage scholars to reconsider narratives surrounding race and nature. While the text undoubtedly opens new avenues of inquiry into African American literature, areas remain for further exploration and refinement. By deepening the engagement with the explored texts, Klestil's work could serve as an even more impactful resource concerning the complex interrelations between race and environmental issues for scholars and students alike.

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