

# *Skepsi*

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## *Pharmakon*: Literature and Violence



**Mourning with Antigone: Civil War and Public Mourning in Patricia Ariza's *Antígona***

Katie Billotte (Royal Holloway College: University of London)

**Fetishism and Symbolic Violence: Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh***

Filippo Menozzi (University of Kent)

**Therapeutic Narrations: Recounting Fascist Psychological Violence in Alberto Asor Rosa's *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* and Esther Tusquets' *Habíamos ganado la guerra***

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**Confronting Violence in Reading and Representation: Brutality and Witnessing in the Work of Edwidge Danticat**

Jo Collins (University of Kent)

**Georges Bataille's 'Ethics of Violence'**

Angelos Evangelou (University of Kent)

**Violence, Resistance and the Birth of a New Literature**

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The aim of *Skepsi*'s editorial board is twofold: to honour the spirit of SECL by striving to take advantage of its unique position as a crossroads in academic studies in Europe and to become a forum for European postgraduate researchers and postdoctoral scholars by developing collective thinking processes in the context of academic research.

Our title, *Skepsi* — which comes from the Ancient Greek 'σκεψις [*skepsis*]' or 'enquiry' and the Modern Greek 'σκέψις [*sképsis*]' or 'thought' — symbolises our will to explore new areas and new methods in the traditional fields of academic research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Originality and creativity in the approach of thought and of texts are crucial for us: to enhance and to promote these aspects will be our contribution to the tremendous range of existing academic publications.



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Filippo Menozzi



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## Foreword

As Edward Said observed in many of his important writings, texts and representations do not exist as if in a void but play an active role in the world and are contaminated by a multitude of heterogeneous realities. Part and parcel of this fundamental quality of 'worldliness', violence is one compelling reality which has reached a remarkable threshold of visibility in the contemporary world and which has been subjected to a problematic work of distancing and spectacularisation.

The effects of violence are many: it both limits narrative possibilities, restrains by the imposition of silence and demands the most dramatic and urgent representative articulations. This issue of *Skepsi* draws its metaphorical inspiration from the image of the *pharmakon*, an ambiguous Ancient Greek word suggesting as it does in its double meaning of medicine and poison connotations of both pharmaceutical remedy and perilous supplement to the human organism. The ambivalence of the *pharmakon* could elucidate an important aspect of literature and art, in their participation in and testimony to contexts of violence, war and brutality. With their different emphases, the articles included in this issue address the many and varied ways in which violence imposes a worldly dimension of artistic and literary forms. Although the conference organisers intended literature to be the main cultural practice under scrutiny, these critical essays have intriguingly extended their creative scope far beyond the analysis of literary works by reaching into expressive domains such as theatre and the plastic arts and through their dynamic interaction with divergent types of violence, from the political brutality of totalitarian and colonial regimes to the ideological configurations of structural and symbolic violence, or dramatic situations of war and conflict.

The essays collected in this issue make use of different theoretical and methodological frameworks and aim at presenting original interventions in different areas of research in the humanities: from postcolonial studies to comparative literature, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, sociology and philosophy. I hope the reader will encounter in the following pages material that stimulates thought and critical reflection.

Filippo Menozzi, Guest Editor, Autumn 2010

## **Mourning with Antigone: Civil War and Public Mourning in Patricia Ariza's *Antígona***

Katie Billotte

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For a brief moment it appeared that the 2010 Colombian presidential election would be nothing short of revolutionary. It began predictably enough. When the country whose name is often perceived as synonymous with civil war and drug trafficking held congressional elections on the 14 March 2010, the results indicated that there was no reason to doubt that conservative forces within the country would continue to dominate the nation's political scene. This meant that Juan Manuel Santos, the minister of defence, was well-positioned to become the country's next head of state. What not even the most acute political observer could have expected was that only a few months later the mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus, running under the banner of Colombia's newly formed Green Party, would become a serious contender in the presidential race. When the 20th June run-off election became a contest between Santos and Mockus, many began to say that a new way of doing politics was coming to the troubled nation.

The historic election of a 'Green' head of state in Colombia was, however, not to be. Mockus was soundly defeated by Santos, who won by a margin of almost three to one (Brodzinsky 2010). Santos' victory was seen by many as an endorsement of the hard line policies against drug cartels and Marxist guerrillas pursued by the Colombian government (with the help of significant U.S. aid) under Santos' predecessor, Álvaro Uribe.<sup>1</sup> These same reports praised how effective Uribe's policies had been in reducing the amount of violence in the country. What went widely unmentioned is the continued violence in Colombia perpetrated by government-backed paramilitaries as well as other grave human rights. A report by Amnesty International, submitted to the U.N.'s Human Rights Commission immediately prior to the election, details the troubling situation in Colombia. Along with

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2000, most U.S. aid to Colombia has come through a scheme known as Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia was conceived in 1998 during a meeting between the then-U.S. president Bill Clinton and the then-Colombian president Andres Pastrana. Uribe has continued to pursue the policies laid out in Plan Colombia and has often been even more 'pro-active' in his military pursuit of rebels. While the plan does include aid to areas outside of defense, approximately 68% of the money is spent on military supplies and activities. This has led many critics to note that the scheme does little to address the underlying inequities in Colombian society which fuel both the drug trade and support for left-wing rebels. Moreover, increasing amounts of evidence suggest that Plan Colombia has not only been ineffective in reducing drug-trafficking, it might also actually be financing the drug lords. See Ballvé 2009.

describing the activities of drug lords and anti-government guerrillas, the report outlines a variety of illegal activities carried out by the Colombian government against human rights defenders and other activists:

A climate of hostility towards human rights defenders and other activists exacerbates the ongoing serious situation they face. Such hostility has been fomented by the Government, which appears to perceive human rights and security as mutually exclusive. Senior Government and state officials often seek to equate human rights work with support for the guerrillas or terrorism. Such a systematic, high-profile and public stigmatization has given a powerful incentive to those wishing to threaten and physically harm human rights defenders. (Amnesty International 2010)

Patricia Ariza, the author of the play referenced in this essay, is one of the activists who have been targeted by the Colombian regime. Ariza's work has always been overwhelmingly political in nature, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that she has both run foul of the Colombian regime and been drawn to *Antigone*. *Antígona* certainly represents an instance where it is difficult to separate Ariza's theatre from her politics. She began her work on *Antígona* after meeting rural women in the war-torn province of Urába, one of the Colombian regions most affected by the country's ongoing turmoil.<sup>2</sup> The lives of the women Ariza met in Urába shared a tragic parallel with the story of *Antigone*. Many of their male relatives had been killed in a recent bout of fighting, and they had been prevented from burying the dead men by governmental decree since the dead men were suspected rebels (Pinzón 2006). After meeting these women, Ariza spent nearly eight years working on *Antígona* which premiered in Bogotá in the summer of 2006 at La Calendaría, the theatre which Ariza helped to found almost three decades ago.

The play was produced as part of the Magdalena Project, an international theatre initiative that seeks to support female playwrights engaged in innovative and socially relevant work. It is difficult to doubt that Ariza's play is indeed innovative as she has altered the play's structure to include three Antigones and two Ismenes, a change which (if nothing else) is very inventive indeed. However, the question of relevance is, as always, much harder to define. Certainly, many of the questions raised by the story of Antigone are questions which continue to be asked. Some of these questions are particularly urgent in communities touched by widespread violence and long term civil conflict, places such as Colombia. First among these

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<sup>2</sup> As much an activist as a playwright, Ariza has made similar trips throughout her career as part of her work in support of left-wing causes. It is important to note that while Ariza has never made a secret of her left-wing sympathies, she has long denied any connection with *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), the most active of Colombia's Marxist rebels. Several government investigations have attempted to tie her to the group, but they have produced no conclusive evidence. The Public Prosecutor now denies that Ariza was ever investigated by the antiterrorism unit. (International PEN 2009).

questions are those which centre on issues of mourning and violence and the relationship between the two.

It is important, before we continue, to take a moment to understand what exactly is meant by the term *mourning*. Mourning is not, as I will discuss it here, the same as grief. For our purposes, mourning is a series of public acts which may or may not be connected to genuine feelings of sorrow or loss. Mourning is not about for whom and how we actually grieve but for whom and how we are supposed to grieve. In the words of Émile Durkheim, ‘Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions...it is a duty imposed by the group’ (Durkheim 1915: 397).<sup>3</sup> I first became interested in the issue of mourning and its connection to violence through Judith Butler’s 2004 book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. In it, Butler connects the politics of violence to the politics of mourning to demonstrate not only that mourning is a political act (a point that is often overlooked), but also that it is crucial to understanding why and how violence occurs. This study continues Butler’s discussion through reflecting on the connection between violence and mourning as they are presented in Sophocles’ *Antigone* and through examining how Ariza maintains and adapts these connections in *Antigona*.

We begin with the portrayal of mourning and violence in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Butler asks in *Precarious Life*, ‘Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What makes for a grievable life?’ (Butler 2004: 20; original emphasis). Perhaps more than the relationship between the state and the individual or the responsibilities of kinship, these are the matters at the heart of *Antigone*. Of course, all of these issues are interconnected. It is worth noting that in an earlier monograph, tellingly entitled *Antigone’s Claim*, Butler is concerned, amongst other things, with how the figure of Antigone relates to normative notions of kinship. To ask, ‘Who is kin?’ is not entirely dissimilar from asking, ‘Who is human?’ Both questions are concerned with the definition of the person as a relational category and the answers to both questions rely, in large part, upon community consensus.

Moreover, issues of kinship, death, mourning, and violence are all deeply connected to the body. When we ask who is human or how human beings are related to one another, we are asking about what it means to have a body such as ours and what the possession of that body means about our relationship to others with similar bodies. The body has, as Butler says, ‘an invariably public dimension.’ (Butler 2004: 26). And nowhere is the public dimension of the body clearer than in the rituals of mourning. Burial rituals are concerned with a body which is

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Davies (Davies 1997: 15).

completely devoid of life and thus any personality, and yet the very nature of the customs implies the unique personality of the lifeless body and affirms the connection between that body and the life which once inhabited it. It is for this reason that there is such a close connection between the worth granted to the individual and the amount of mourning afforded to the corpse. In his 1997 book *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funeral Rites*, Douglas James Davis stresses the continuity between the living body and the corpse as a fundamental feature of burial ritual, when he writes that through funeral rights, ‘[t]he identity of the body is not extinguished, it is simply transformed and revealed in its new state.’ (Davis 1997: 14). If the corpse maintains its identity, then the treatment received by the corpse is nothing other than the treatment received by the person who the corpse does not merely represent but is. The plot of *Antigone* depends upon this association, since clearly Creon’s decree to deny Polynices burial can only make sense if we accept an unbroken continuity between the living and the dead body (something the characters within the play clearly do). Note, for example, Creon’s reaction to the news of Polynices’ burial:

πότερον ὑπερτιμῶντες ὡς εὐεργέτην  
 ἔκρυπτον αὐτόν, ὅστις ἀμφικίονας  
 ναοὺς πυρώσων ἦλθε κἀναθήματα  
 καὶ γῆν ἐκείνων καὶ νόμους διασκεδῶν;  
 ἢ τοὺς κακοῦς τιμῶντας εἰσορᾷς θεοῦς;  
 οὐκ ἔστιν (*Ant.* ll. 284–89)<sup>4</sup>

[*Did the gods bury him with special honours for being/such a great benefactor to Thebes, a man who came here/to torch their column-ringed temples and all the rich offerings, /a man who came to destroy both their land and their laws? (Ant. 370)*]

This supposition places the body at the centre of individual identity by asserting that the body of an individual continues to be that individual even when every other defining characteristic has been cut off from the body by death.

If the body is at the centre of identity, then Creon’s decision not to bury Polynices has serious implications about Polynices’ identity. I would suggest that the denial of burial is an implicit denial of full humanity. Burial rituals, like language and tool-making, are one of the markers by which human beings are identified. This is why the presence of planned graves at an archeologically site has been used by paleoanthropologists as an indication of the presence of ‘modern humans’ (Davis 1997: 5). Thus by refusing Polynices’ burial, Creon is denying him one of the principle signs of humanity. This is obviously an extreme measure, which is why Creon must then legitimise his action by connecting his dehumanising treatment of

<sup>4</sup> References accompanying quotations in Greek give the line numbers in *Sophoclis Fabulae*; those accompanying the English translations give the page number(s) in *Three Theban Plays*.

Polynices in death with Polynices' inhuman behaviour in life. Hence Creon describes Polynices as isolated from and hostile toward his community. For Creon, Polynices' rejection of his authority has severed Polynices' relationships within the community. This is because, 'Creon defines the self in relation to others in a hierarchal and contractual fashion' (Foley 2001: 184). If humanity is dependent upon having relationships to other human beings, and if, in Creon's view, Polynices has severed his human relationships, then it is possible to question whether Polynices still deserves to be called human. To suggest that someone who alienates himself from the community no longer qualifies as human is not an outlandish claim. Aristotle would say as much in the *Politics* when he declared that man is an animal who lives in a *polis* and that any man who should find himself without a *polis* is not a man at all but instead a god or a beast.<sup>5</sup>

The view that human identities are fundamentally relational is also present elsewhere within the play. Haemon tells his father that, 'καλῶς γ' ἐρήμης ἂν σὸ γῆς ἄρχοις μόνος [*Alone in a desert, you would make a perfect ruler*]' (*Ant.* 1. 739; *Ant.* 188). Of course, Haemon is implying that a ruler alone in a desert is no sort of ruler at all, since a ruler is only a ruler inasmuch as he has subjects over whom he can rule. This is part of the same paradigm of community-based identity which says that a human being without a *polis* is not a proper human being. Thus it is possible to say that the view of human identity advanced by Aristotle is present in the *Antigone*. Consequently, in alienating himself from his *polis*, Polynices has placed into question the status of his humanity. To deny him burial merely acknowledges and perpetuates his non-human status. Conversely, in burying her brother Antigone not only fulfils her role as a dutiful sister: she reasserts her brother's humanity.

By rebutting attempts to deny her brother's humanity and thereby delegitimising the decision to deny him burial, Antigone also calls into question the legitimacy of the violence which brought about his death. That it is necessary to dehumanise an individual in order to perpetuate violence against him or her is an oft-repeated truism; the mechanism by which this occurs is less often discussed. In *Precarious Lives*, Butler suggests one possible reason why individuals and/or groups of individuals who have been dehumanised rhetorically are thus rendered as potential targets of violence:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange

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<sup>5</sup> (*Pol.* I.1253a): ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον, καὶ ὁ ἄπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην ἤτοι φαῦλός ἐστιν, ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἄνθρωπος [*And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state is either above humanity or below it*] (Aristotle 2008: 28)



way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were’, and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (Butler 2004: 20)

It is possible to see this paradigm employed in *Antigone* not only in Polynices’ death and subsequent non-burial but also in Antigone’s own death sentence. Haemon warns his father against doing violence to Antigone by noting that, ‘ὀδύρεται πόλις [*The city mourns*]’ (*Ant.* l. 694; *Ant.* 186) for Antigone. If Antigone is, to borrow Butler’s word, *grievable*, then she is shielded from violence since those who should be mourned cannot legitimately be the victims of violence.

Antigone, of course, does not accept that her brother should have been killed (except in the sense that she accepts that they are both from a cursed bloodline), and consequently she refuses to believe he should be unburied. She sees herself as obliged to correct this wrong, because he is her brother. She does not, however, believe that she would have a similar obligation were she to share any other bond with him, a point made clear in the following speech:

οὐ γάρ ποτ’ οὔτ’ ἄν, εἰ τέκνων μήτηρ ἔφυν,  
οὔτ’ εἰ πόσις μοι καταθάνων ἐτήκετο,  
βία πολιτῶν τόνδ’ ἄν ἠρόμην πόνον. (*Ant.* ll. 905–07)

[*And yet had I become a mother/of children, if a husband had died and lain rotting,/above the ground, I never would have taken up such a burden/against the will of the people.* (*Ant.* 194–95)]

Such a disclaimer seems strange to our modern ears. This is, for example, clearly not a sentiment shared by the women who inspired Patricia Ariza to undertake an adaptation of *Antigone*. In fact, this is the very sort of statement which highlights the often deep chasms between the ancient world and our own. An adaptation of any ancient work must bridge these gaps if it is to be effective and meaningful within its own context. For this reason, I now turn to how the Sophoclean discussion of mourning and violence is translated in Ariza’s adaptation.

In order to do this, we must look at the structural differences between the two plays. There are many significant and telling ways in which Ariza departs from Sophocles. The most obvious of these differences I have mentioned earlier in passing. In Ariza’s adaptation there are three Antigones and two Ismenes on stage. But not only does Ariza create multiple incarnations of the characters who are already in Sophocles’ play, she also adds additional characters who are not present in the original. Polynices, Eteocles, Oedipus, and the Furies all add their voices to *Antígona*. Since the Chorus is still present, the result is a much larger cast than in Sophocles’ original.



The most immediate consequence of this expanded cast is that there are many more perspectives involved in the debate over whether or not Polynices should be buried. The dead and the living, the mortal and the immortal are all consulted on the issue of who should be mourned and how. In doing this they also, as we have discussed earlier, implicitly offer an opinion on who might legitimately be the subject of violence. Jocasta is the only member of Oedipus' original household who does not make an appearance at what one might think of as a very strange family reunion. I think that her absence can be explained if we understand *Antígona*, as I am suggesting, as a meditation upon mourning, violence, and their consequences.

The absence of Jocasta is particularly striking when one considers the significant role which organisations formed by mothers have played in anti-violence movements throughout Latin America. *La Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina is the most well-known of these organisations, but similar organisations and movements have appeared in many other countries throughout the region, including Colombia. These mothers' organisations have been central in organising the public mourning of those killed over the last century in various conflicts throughout Central and South America and have consequently also been one of the principal voices in calls to end the violence. A large part of the activism of such groups has centred on the idea that private grief is simply insufficient. The public act of mourning must occur for deaths, and the lives that preceded them, to have any real significance. Why, then, is Jocasta excluded from Ariza's extended cast is linked to the play's thematic focus on mourning and violence. If Sophocles' *Antigone* and consequently Ariza's *Antígona* are concerned principally with questions surrounding mourning and violence, namely who is worthy of mourning and who is worthy of violence, then the appearance of Jocasta in *Antígona* would undermine the play's ability to ask those questions. This is particularly true in the Latin American context where mothers have routinely organised and entered into the public debate explicitly in order to humanise the victims of political violence through mourning and thus to prevent further individuals from being victimised. For example, in Scene I Ismene 2 says, 'Estuve llorando en silencio a nuestros hermanos [*I have been crying in silence for our brothers*]' (Ariza 2006).<sup>6</sup> In the context of decades of mourning-based activism by mothers, one would expect such a statement to be challenged by any mother in

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<sup>6</sup> All translations from Spanish are by the author of this article.

the play. This, however, would undermine the debate between the Ismenes and the Antigones which is so central to the play's activist character.

While Jocasta is completely absent from the stage, Polynices is nearly so. He appears only briefly in Scene VII, summoned from the underworld by Tiresias and the Furies. Considering the number of additional characters in Ariza's script and that Polynices is at the heart of plot, the brevity of his stage time is notable. Through the very short scene, Polynices remains on the periphery in every possible way which serves to reinforce the status which has permitted his violent and unmarked death. Polynices never speaks with his sister or uncle. He is only able only to communicate with Tiresias, the Furies, and the Chorus—all also marginal and marginalised figures. He tells them, 'Yo era el merecedor del trono por ser el de más edad [*I was worthy of the throne, being the oldest*] (Ibid). Yet this is the only defence he offers up for his inheritance or for his life. His final utterance, a piercing call for his sister, is perhaps the strongest assertion he makes for his right to belong still to the protected community of humankind. By that scream, he reasserts the final link he has with another person and this becomes his most defiant protest of his death and postmortem exposure.

But Polynices is not the only brother who speaks. Eteocles too appears in the Ariza's adaptation. What is interesting is that in *Antígona* the most condemning word about Polynices come from the mouth of Eteocles:

¡Silencio! ¡Silencio! No es conveniente ya llorar ni gemir. Polinices no tenía la virgen de la justicia en su escudo y tampoco escrúpulos en su corazón. Maltrató a su patria y por eso mereció la muerte de mi propia mano. Yo mismo me entregué al combate defendiendo el derecho al trono. Fue en franca y limpia lid, rey contra rey, enemigo contra enemigo, hermano contra hermano. (Ibid)

[*Silence! Silence! It is neither appropriate to mourn nor wail. Polynices did not have the virgin of justice on his shield nor scruples in his heart. He abused his country and therefore deserved death at my hand. I threw myself into the fight to defend right and the throne. It was fair and square, a king against a king, an enemy against an enemy, a brother against a brother.*]

Perhaps it is not surprising that in a play where Eteocles is allowed to speak that he should be the one who most virulently justifies the way Polynices was treated. He must deny his humanity, legitimise the violence done to him and confirm that he should go unburied, because when he is present it is Eteocles who has the most to justify.

Despite these structural differences, the basic paradigms put forward in Ariza's play around violence and mourning remain virtually identical to Sophocles'. Jocasta's notable absence, Polynices' brief and marginalised appearance, Eteocles' harsh condemnation; these are all aimed at demonstrating how Polynices has fallen outside the scope of the human community and therefore was both a legitimate target of violence and unworthy of burial.

Antigone's defiance therefore in both renditions of the play lies in her refusal to accept that her brother was anything less than human, or rather, that any human being can behave in such a way as lose his or her 'human' status. Antigone's crusade is therefore the crusade of human rights and anti-violence activists the world over. She stands as a symbol, not just of defiance against the arbitrary exercise of power by the state, but against any attempt to strip any individual of his or her full humanity both in life and in death.

Most certainly in Colombia, where generations have grown up under the threat of violence and in the shadow of the mourned and the unburied, it is difficult to do anything that is not in some way touched by the long shadow of that violence. Colombia is also a nation that is still torn apart into multiple warring factions and haunted by tyranny. These realities seem particularly hard to escape when staging any version of *Antigone* since *Antigone* has traditionally been understood to be about the relationship between the virtuous individual and the tyrant. It is, of course, important and necessary to question how an individual should respond in the face of tyranny, but I think that the (for lack of a better word) political questions which the *Antigone* asks extend much deeper than this. *Antigone* is asking not just how we should respond to violence but why that violence occurs in the first place. By looking at the dynamics of mourning, *Antigone* is questioning the legitimacy of violence.

These are questions one cannot help but ask when looking at the recent history of Colombia and they also are unavoidably part of *Antigone*. The building of a sound theoretical connection between mourning and violence has implications not only for the critical study of literature concerned with either or both but also for the numerous instances in which mourning is used as a tool for activism. Ultimately, this is the role which Ariza's *Antígona* is playing as well. While the women with whom Ariza met in Urába may have been denied the opportunity to mourn the men they loved in a conventional way, Ariza has created through *Antígona* an alternative means of public mourning for them and in doing so she has created a wider dialogue about the meaning of their deaths and the deaths of others like them.

At the end of *Antigone*, Creon is punished for his impiety by the death of his son. He is not immune from the violence he has allowed to be inflicted on others. But perhaps the best warning to us comes from Tiresia at the end of Ariza's *Antígona*:

Ciudadanos de Tebas, salgan ya de de sus casas y de sus guaridas, recorran el velo que les ciega la vista, Su silencio ha sido el mayor cómplice de la tragedia. Salgan, sé que están ahí, escondidos. Salgan y vengan a ver de una vez por todas las ruinas de la guerra. (ibid)

[Citizens of Thebes! Come out from your houses and your abodes! Lift the veil that blinds your sight! Your silence has been this tragedy's greatest accomplice. Come out! I know you are hidden there! Come out and see the ruins of war once and for all.]

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- Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, ed. by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (London: Methuen, 2002)
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## Fetishism and Symbolic Violence: Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh*<sup>1</sup>

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My first encounter with *Svayambh* took place one rainy night in December, 2009, when I visited an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. I arrived quite late but had time to wander through the exhibition rooms rearranged to accommodate coloured forms and mirroring surfaces which immediately exerted a deep fascination on me. The event was dedicated to the contemporary sculptor Anish Kapoor, and one of his works in particular attracted my attention; a huge block of red material placed on a long track which passed through several rooms of the Academy in continuous but almost unnoticeable motion: *Svayambh*.<sup>2</sup> In this article I offer a reflection on the psychoanalytic notion of fetishism and the concept of symbolic violence. I have borrowed the latter idea from the late Pierre Bourdieu, although I will not be discussing his approach to art and cultural transmission in this article. The juxtaposition of these two notions was inspired by the slow movement of *Svayambh* combined with the atmosphere of that night and came to me in the days after my visit to the exhibition. In what follows I will not provide a detailed analysis of *Svayambh* but rather, my writing will attempt to reproduce on a philosophical and discursive level the physical, retinal impression that it made upon me on that occasion. *Svayambh* will not be the object of a discourse but rather the source, literally invisible but also intimately and strongly present, underlying a purely philosophical argument. I will refer to the work in order to mark the place where the physical impression and intellectual meditation provoked by what I posit as a fundamentally unreadable artwork could momentarily converge. My methodological intention is to prevent *Svayambh* from becoming a paradigmatic case or an example to be easily encapsulated in a predefined discursive framework, and also to avoid that hermeneutic preoccupation which Homi Bhabha (2009), in a remarkable essay published in the catalogue of the exhibition, calls the 'anxiety of attribution'(26). I hope my reasoning will participate in what Kapoor himself (2007) designates as the 'immaterial becoming of an object', in its passage from the realm of material presence to any word or concept that could be forged after it and because of it. My reading will be also inspired by what Martin Heidegger (1971: 169)

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article were first presented as a paper at *Pharmakon: Literature and Violence*, a postgraduate conference organised by the School of English at the University of Kent and held on 20th May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *Svayambh* was first exhibited in Nantes in 2007.

calls a ‘semi-poetic way of looking at things’: a way of focusing our attention on the thing itself or disclosing something of it without transforming it into the fixated and rigid object of our own representation. In its cogitative meanderings, this article will attempt to enact a tentative dismantling of the violence of critical textuality, namely that kind of violence practised in the interpretative identification of a work of art, that domesticating procedure which reduces the enigmatic specificity of a work to the concatenating categories of art history or art criticism. For this reason, my aim will be the somehow paradoxical formulation of a discourse that recognises its closeness and debt to the figure but also the figure’s irremediable distance and originality.

### 1. Fetishism

Unlike a passive object of artistic contemplation, *Svayambh* reveals a field of phenomenological experience which can be neither mastered by its subject, both as spectator and creator, nor totally embraced by the spatio-temporal frame of its display, and which seems to reflect a kind of immensity that cannot be entirely circumscribed by its architectural setting. Borrowing from Lacoue-Labarthe’s fascinating reflection on poetry, it could be said that the poetic existence of this object:

allows itself to be spoken of in and by he who is drawn to it in spite of himself, who receives it as unreceivable, and who submits to it. Accepts it, trembling lest it refuse him, it being so strange, fleeting and ungraspable, as is all the meaning of what is. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989: 26)

This enigmatic exhibition of an entity whose title can be roughly translated from the Sanskrit as ‘self-generated’ (Rosenthal 2009: 44) epitomises an unobtainable essence that might clarify an essentially aesthetic quality: ‘the paradox that something made exists for its own sake’ (Adorno 1997: 29). As Theodor Adorno emphasises, this founding mis-recognition of authorial heteronomy (something that resonates with Kapoor’s separation of the object from its objecthood and with his idea that ‘the object must maintain its mystery and never reveal its plan’ (Kapoor, 2007)), this aesthetic also corresponds to the fetishistic element in art, an element that bears the mark of a powerfully ideological component but also the promise of liberation represented by ‘things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity’ (Adorno 1997: 298). This form of fetishism must not be confused with a colonising commodification of the thing but may be affiliated to the psychoanalytic speculation about this concept, a meditation that could, in the case of *Svayambh*, perceptively address the unreconciled tension between the object’s tangible

expression and the relative work of conceptualisation. In *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Giorgio Agamben writes that:

the fetish confronts us with the paradox of an unattainable object that satisfies a human need precisely through its being unattainable. Insofar as it is a presence, the fetish object is in fact something concrete and tangible; but insofar as it is the presence of an absence, it is, at the same time, immaterial and intangible, because it alludes continuously beyond itself to something that can never really be possessed. (Agamben 1993: 33)

This unattainable presence is related to the mechanism described by Freud as *Verleugnung* (disavowal), a ‘negative reference’ determined by the fact that ‘the substituted term is [...] at once negated and evoked by the substitution’ (32). If this intriguing description of the fetish seems to give conceptual consistency to an important property conveyed by *Svayambh*, the fact that its absolute materiality does not result in objectification but rather in an immanent and formless immateriality, it could also be suggested that this sculptural object points to a different idea of fetishism, one with extraordinary aesthetic and philosophical potentialities. In fact, within the psychoanalytic intellectual genealogy, even this economy of undecidable resistance to appropriation and logic equivalence (negation/evocation) rests upon the persistence of a ‘substituted term’, the phallus, which inscribes the formation of identities in a logic of singularity: presence (of the same) or lack. Similarly, Julia Kristeva defines fetishism as ‘a stasis that acts as a thesis’, that is ‘a telescoping of the symbolic’s characteristic thetic moment and of one of those instinctually invested stases (bodies, part of bodies, orifices, containing objects, and so forth). This stasis thus becomes the ersatz of the sign’ (Kristeva 1984: 64), the disavowal of the enunciative mastering of the thing, or the negation of the unspeakable absence moulded by the object, a negation that replaces it with an impossible supplement. This mechanism entails a perversion of the ‘thesis’, a Greek word that Heidegger translated as ‘a setting up in the unconcealed’ or ‘taking possession’, close to the idea of ‘placing, as for instance, letting a statue be set up’ (Heidegger 1971: 79), a bringing forth which establishes a boundary by means of a fixing in place. Fetishism displaces this ‘bringing forth’, inherent in every cultural production, from the law of symbolic differentiation to the inner layer of a pre-subjective realm of drives, embodying the refusal to channel the unexpected or unpredictable into the structuring apparatus of perceptual identification. It is for this reason that, as Agamben points out, fetishistic passion concerns not an irreplaceable and unique entity but rather a proliferation of never-satisfying surrogates. From this psychoanalytic perspective, the negative reference of fetishism indicates a tentative escape from the regulative principle of social determination and from the affirmative positing of the object. As Kristeva makes clear, this diversion is not in the nature of art – the specificity of



the poetic function – because art maintains a signification, a symbolic operation which defines its function of sign. In fact, this psychoanalytic explanation of the fetish is extremely important as it allows us to contrastively appreciate the socio-ideological symptom of the aesthetic space. Nevertheless, it is also true that this view is grounded in a restricted framework, an epistemic context that precludes the thought of fetishism originally inspired by the perception of this artwork's specific objecthood. In particular, the reflection provoked by the encounter with *Svayambh* has something to do with the definition of art as an 'irruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of "natural language" which binds together the social unit' (Kristeva 1984: 62), a process which ensures and preserves the thetic moment rather than simply obliterating the subject function. From this standpoint, the figural opacity of art is reduced to the never totally accomplished disruptive pressure of the drives on a textual chain, something Adorno was able to criticise with unparalleled lucidity: 'Freud's adaptation of the aesthetic to the theory of the instincts seems to seal itself off from art's spiritual essence; for Freud, artworks are indeed, even though sublimated, little more than plenipotentiaries of sensual impulses' (Adorno 1997: 13). According to Kristeva, art's ability to 'signify the un-signifying' makes it different from a fetish and prevents it from 'foundering in an "unsayable" without limits': the poetic function 'therefore converges with fetishism; it is not, however, identical with it' (Kristeva 1984: 65). Art reproduces the machinery of the sign rather than being simply a substitute for it, so that its transgression of the symbolic order (understood in terms of objective projection and subjective predication) takes place after the latter's consolidation rather than, as with fetishism itself, in the pre-symbolic locus of an undeniable and unacceptable perceptual discovery. The question that *Svayambh*'s spatio-temporal oscillations could pose to this reintroduction of libidinal economy into our idea of art is inspired by their ability to express a poetic function which can be *de facto* identified with a form of fetishism: as an unattainable object that cannot be properly recognised by our sensory organisation this poetic function also challenges the privilege of the symbolic codification of the subject. This experience of non-appropriable negation/evocation is manifested by a certain creative power or vitality in the thing itself, a dynamic that cannot be encompassed by any metaphysics of singularity and that, by the insertion of the unintelligible in the opening up of a deformed logic of visibility, does not uphold and repeat the persistence of the thetic phase. In its figural dimension, this dynamic can be assimilated into neither the practice of signification nor the stasis of sensual investment: rather, it unsettles the sedimentation of conventional and normalised perceptual suppositions. Anish Kapoor states



that as creator and artist he has ‘nothing to say’ (Kapoor 2006-2007), an affirmation that introduces the idea that *Svayambh* works on a level which can be critically contrasted with that tendency outlined by Craig Owens (1979: 122) as ‘the eruption of language into the field of the visual arts’. More importantly, this particular sculptural practice reveals that the price we pay for the recognition of ‘that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social’ (Kristeva 1984: 67) in the sphere of aesthetics is the assimilation of artistic practice into *textual* practice, or the violent reduction of its figurative logic to discursive reason. As a consequence, experiencing this artwork could lead us to call into question the idea that ‘textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social’ (67), and its constitutive annex, namely the statement that the non-textual or fetishistic dismantling of the symbolic *of necessity* sinks into the irrationality of the drives, leading to the dissolution of the subject and of its capacity to cope with reality. This sculptural experiment could articulate a form of poetic existence that is not deducible from the model of language and that, borrowing a passage from Agamben’s *Infancy and History*, could be depicted as ‘the simple difference between the human and the linguistic’:

a pure, transcendental experience which, like human infancy, is free both of the subject and of any psychological substratum. It is not simply an event to be isolated chronologically, nor anything like a psychosomatic state which either child psychology (at the level of *parole*) or palaeoanthropology (at the level of *langue*) could ever construct as a human event independent of language. However, it is not even something that can be wholly resolved within language, except as a transcendental source or an Ur-limit. (Agamben 1993: 50)

If this transcendental source, which produces the opening of historicity and brings with itself the burden of a truth content, cannot be wholly resolved within language, at the same time it implicates a mystery, an ineffable space of reality that, by virtue of its unspeakable nature, corresponds to the interminable and necessary waiting for what Adorno called ‘the redemptive word that would dissolve its constitutive darkening’ (1997: 162). In its erasure of the entangling of the poetic in the symbolic function, *Svayambh* reveals a mysterious element of *pathos*, an imageless sensuality that transcends the appearance of the thing and that, for this reason, enables us to dislocate the latent opposition of presence and lack underlying the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of fetishism, a conception that assumes the characterisation of a subject ‘unable to acknowledge that what it is that he sees might be the *actuality of another being*: one that may well resemble him but is other than him. All “man” can see the absence of himself or the lack in the other’ (Rooney 2000: 80). Against this inability or, better, in order to raise a disorientating consciousness of this problem in the most intimate and

familiar part of our experience, our chronotopical location, Kapoor's artwork is able to provoke a sense of surprise:

the moment between narcissistic reflection and the thought of 'not me' which is the moment in which the surprise or shock of there being another there may be registered: being as incomplete and not completed, in that there are other living beings (Rooney 2000: 80)

By incarnating the essence of an 'other living being', the occurrence of a work like *Svayambh* could bring about a reformulation of the fetish, a concept which could provoke 'a different ontological understanding of being, one which is not opposed to non-being' (Rooney 2000: 81). If *Svayambh* points to a particular realisation of the creative potential of art, the perceptual intensity of the object seems to resonate with a different conception of fetishism:

What does it mean to generalise a *sexual* economy of fetishism when Western knowledge so often generalises on the basis of a sexual differential? Why always this as the starting point? Is there a way in which spirits may be primary, prior to a thinking of "man"? (Rooney 2000: 90)

It may be said that the aim of this meditation is to produce an original answer to this questioning, one that does not depend on thethetic or divisive doubling of sexual difference and that corresponds to the defamiliarising project of making the aesthetic subject conscious of a possibly anti/thetic dimension in our faculty of perceptual recognition. Accordingly, Kapoor's work could bring to mind a spiritual character comparable to that cinematic fetishism described by Christian Metz: 'the whole of cinematic fetishism consists in the constant and teasing displacement of the cutting line which separates the seen from the unseen' (Metz 1985: 88). Rather than entralling our gaze through an imaginary fixation, *Svayambh* could be depicted as an 'extraordinary activator of fetishism', the site of a dynamic interaction between immanence and immateriality. For this reason this artwork could be said to point to a fascinating logic of the invisible, an invisible redefined not as absence or lack but rather as the oscillation of a spirited material presence which cannot be appropriated. The self-moving and unrecognisable framing and deframing of this object prevents it from being totally domesticated by the subjective field of vision and by the violence of theoretical discourse, thus introducing in our discourse an unsolved dialectic that the philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009) portrays as the innermost tension between *logos* and *pathos*. This specific artistic production might engender a spirited philosophy of alterity related to a sculptural technique of perceptual defamiliarisation. If Kapoor's artwork can be interpreted in these terms, the most compelling question concerns how might a non-textual and auratic experience such as this huge self-moving block of wax and paint can retain its social or subjective

moment without being reduced to the semiotic or impulsive breaching of the symbolic syntax. The answer might be found in the unfolding of the subversive temporality of this work.

## 2. Symbolic violence

The element of time cannot be wholly resolved by the perceptual immediacy of the spectator when experiencing *Svayambh*. Instead, this experiencing operates a shift from empirical time to a dissonant and unreconciled temporal synthesis evoked by the artwork itself. This particular materialisation of time achieves an unexpectedly impressive and disturbing visuality, shaped by the movement of a gigantic wax block making its way through the doors of contiguous exhibition rooms, a block of red material which marks the door frames through which it traverses with traces of its passage. Its movement embodies a fundamental sense of rhythm that the limitations of space make unavailable to the stable or static positioning of the spectator. Kapoor's principle of composition, that 'the space contained in an object must be bigger than the object which contains it' (Kapoor 2007), achieves a powerfully effective fulfilment in this work. The constraints of the containing space are thus visualised as the negative of the work's autonomous law of temporality, a law pointing to the immensity of the contained space, the intimate unfolding of the immaterial non-factuality of the object itself. The phenomenological level is hence dislocated by the alternative temporal worlding of the artwork, the prolongation of the fabric of its dense material in a slow but continuous rhythm, a process that may be understood as investigating the very genesis of time.

Because of its eccentric reshaping of our temporal perception, *Svayambh* evokes a sense of reality beyond the reach of subjective experience or textual concatenation, something that cannot be reduced to neither the performative function of the symbolic order nor the phenomenological activity of the subject, nor the realm of the drives. Rather, this non-textual aesthetic process is able to bring about the possibility of a new consciousness in the subject, a fact that suggests that the materiality of the work presents a transforming capacity, as the indication of a different space summoned by the visualisation of a counter-empirical time. The work creates its own temporality, a field of in-visibility which contains a certain spirit of art or what could be named its negativity. This essence, not fixed by the artwork but rather manifested by a hidden glimpse glimmering through the oscillation or combination of its elements, could explain the mystery of artistic creation as an 'assimilative transfiguration of rhythmic intervals', a process which generates 'the modified intensity of the individual occurrences' (Abraham & Rand 1986: 4). In his reflections on the relevance of psychoanalysis to the individuation of the peculiarities of the aesthetic sphere, Nicolas

Abraham proposed an extremely intriguing perspective on this subject. He writes that, from the psychoanalytic point of view, time:

is never dealt with explicitly as an issue or problem; our acquisition of time is parallel to our integration into society. And yet, both clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis constantly make use of concepts referring to aspects of temporality. Certainly, this temporality bears no relation to objective time, nor does it concern the subjective time of "lived experiences." [...] This particular time – which may properly be called transphenomenal – is implied in many psychoanalytic concepts. (Abraham & Rand 1986: 5)

The interesting aspect of this redefinition of time lies in its transphenomenal and negative character: it is neither the time of the individual lived experience, of phenomenology, nor is it the structuring time of socio-ideological conformation, the time which is never questioned or considered in the mysterious space of its origination. Rather, by pointing to an antithetical temporality triggered by the dynamic exchange between consciousness and the unconscious, Abraham develops the possibility of a genetics of time, something which *Svayambh* seems to be capable of raising to a remarkable threshold of tangibility. Following Ferenczi (1952), Abraham demonstrates that the essential correspondence between the subject (the ego in its dynamic relationship with its atemporal counterparts, the super-ego and the unconscious) and reality relies on this temporal dynamism:

In relation to its unconscious counterpart, the ego contrives detours, differrals [*diffèrements*], and displacements. [...] It possesses a correlate in the outside world, the reality referred to by psychoanalysts: the sum total of the paths and obstacles the ego has acquired as its own knowledge. The temporal structure of reality thus faithfully corresponds to the structure of the ego (Abraham & Rand 1986: 6)

The temporal expansion of this artwork embodies something of this intimate correspondence, a faithful relation which links the subject to the real and which obstructs the forcing of abstraction upon the field of sensuality. The essence of this transphenomenal time could be grasped in the oxymoron that this work of art represents, an anti/thesis produced in the rescue of a corporeal immediacy by means of its negation, a paradoxical spirituality of the thing that might recall Adorno's reflection that 'if art were to free itself from the once perceived illusion of duration, were to internalize its own transience in sympathy with the ephemeral life, it would approximate an idea of truth conceived not as something abstractly enduring but in consciousness of its temporal essence' (Adorno 1997: 36–37). An object like *Svayambh* evokes a sense of time that cannot be exhausted by phenomenological terms and that 'sows a deep doubt about the mastery of human historical time' (Bhabha 1998: 39). As a consequence, the philosophical awareness raised by its slow and uninterrupted self-movement may result in a figural deconstruction of the solitude and solidification of the subject, a

mirroring of the dialectic articulation of the unsatisfied unconscious wish and the activity of the ego:

If the fulfilment of the ego's every desire entails the disappointment of an underlying unconscious wish, if what comes is always "something other" than what is expected in one's heart of hearts, the present cannot solidify into a definitive accomplishment. [...] It must slide implacably toward another present, itself, of course, tinged with the same inherent ambiguity. (Abraham & Rand 1986: 6)

The ontology of incompleteness implicated by this shifting or sliding reverberates in the movement of *Svayambh*, a fundamentally creative act that cannot be appropriated as domesticated product or object of contemplation and that for this very reason opens up a world, that 'something other' which displays a shared but undecidable ground of co-existence between the aesthetic subject and reality. This opening of a not yet codified field of poetic experience may be linked to a particular socio-political issue, the question of the inscription of systems of power and ideological adaptation which inhabit the most intimate part of individual experience. The resistance to the violence of intellectual appropriation, a dislocation of the 'thesis' which operates on the level of the bodily apprehension of the real, also foregrounds a critique of the naturalisation of the violence involved by the social inclusion of the subject, a structuring violence which is not simply denied in favour of a celebration of a dispersive annihilation.<sup>3</sup> Rather, this violence is exposed and materialised in a negative act that retains its aesthetic nature and demonstrates the arbitrariness of the categories of spatial and temporal discernment of the perceived world which are most familiar and most often taken for granted. In other words, a meditation inspired by *Svayambh* is able to address in a critical way that thetic principle of collective and ideological structuration which the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines as 'symbolic violence'.

The adjective 'symbolic' can be understood as concerning not just a purely representative domain but rather the locus of intersection between the individual and the collective order, a site where the perception and evidence of the social world is organised, something which Kristeva pictured as 'a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of biological (including sexual) differences and concrete, historical family structures' (Kristeva 1984: 29). Both naturalised and conventional, necessary and arbitrary, the practice of legitimisation and re-production of systems of domination that Bourdieu connotes with the term 'symbolic' is a form of violence '*which is exercised upon a*

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<sup>3</sup> A movement which, following Kristeva, could be defined as negation of that signifying split which does not simply deconstruct the illusion of a transcendental ego, but rather makes the formation of a socially re-defined subject possible.

*social agent with his or her complicity*' and which concerns the practice of sensory recognition, 'the set of fundamental, prereflexive assumptions that social agents engage by the mere fact of taking the world for granted, of accepting the world as it is, and of finding it natural because *their mind is constructed according to cognitive structures that are issued out of the very structures of the world.*' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2004: 272; original emphases in this and the next quotation from this authority). This form of violence constitutes the hidden persuasion of a non-elaborated and naturalised 'imprisonment effected via the body': it '*accomplishes itself through an act of cognition and of misrecognition that lies beyond – or beneath – the controls of consciousness and will*, in the obscurities of the schemata of habitus that are at once gendered and gendering' (273). Bourdieu explained this form of incorporated and non-perceived violence by granting a privileged position to the constitution of the gendered subject, a site where the fit between culturally arbitrary determinants, both structuring and structured by social agents, and the most innate or non-reflexive categories of perception could be exhibited in its brutality and conventionality. As a result, symbolic violence could be described as both spontaneous and extorted: it 'is a form of power that is exerted on bodies, directly and as if by magic, without any physical constraint; but this magic works only on the basis of the dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body' (Bourdieu 2004: 340). The most relevant feature of this kind of violence is that it does not operate with the awareness of both the victim and the perpetrator, but rather it concerns the invisible and unconscious schemes of perception, appreciation and action at the core of every socio-political and ideological disposition. This mechanism works at the level of the lived experience of the physical world, in the immediate context of perception and bodily apprehension, rather than in the articulation of discourses or representations about it. Making a culturally-shaped relation of domination appear as natural, it works on a corporeal ground that does not enter the level of a conscious speculation and critical elaboration: Bourdieu (1989) borrowed the idea of 'world-making' from the philosopher Nelson Goodman as a suggestive way of understanding the extent of this pre-reflexive and fundamentally expropriating power of classification of the reality around us.

## **Conclusion**

From this point of view *Svayambh*, as I encountered it in the rooms of the Royal Academy, inspires a reflection on time, space, and the false immediacy engendering the ideological and material reproduction of symbolic violence. This artistic experiment inaugurates a critical gesture because of its ability to make available to consciousness those socially automatised

procedures of collective projection embedded in our sensory schemata. The presence or absolute materialism of this self-moving formless form was able to substantially misrecognise or de-naturalise (de-familiarise) the sensuous organisation of the locus of its exhibition and, in its bewildering extension and unattainable proximity, to provoke a suspension or re/figuration of the subject's codification of the surrounding time and space. Because of this interruption of the structuring practice of normalised identification and perceptual constitution, this displacement of habitual diagrams of observation could not be entirely enclosed in terms of a purely phenomenological experience. Its irreducibility to the violent encapsulation of visual and plastic opacity in the regulated surface of discursive explanation could be understood as exemplifying the character of a poetic existence which denounces in a disorientating, non-textual, bodily and figurative, mode the procedures of symbolic regulation of a social field. In fact, its oscillation could be discursively developed by an idea of fetishism that does not concern a completely intra-subjective antagonism between the drives and the singular economy of symbolic differentiation. Rather, fetishism is refigured as something that regards the socially posited relation between the subject and reality, a relation which could be reformulated in terms of an aesthetically captivating encounter with an other living being. This critique of textual and symbolic violence could introduce a reconsidered concept of art, one which challenges the alleged compulsiveness of incorporated structures of collective and individual disposition and is therefore able to outline an original reconsideration of the specificity of the aesthetic space. More precisely, *Svayambh* inspires a negative aesthetics that should not be limited to the strictures of a subversive textual practice but that can be related to a sort of hesitation in our encounter with reality, the poetic suggestion of a non-representational and auratic dismantling of the metaphysics of singularity at the core of any epistemic ordering of the real.

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**Therapeutic Narrations: Recounting Fascist Psychological Violence in  
Alberto Asor Rosa's *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* and Esther Tusquets'  
*Habíamos ganado la guerra***

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The aim of this study is to ascertain whether writing autobiographical literature may represent an effective therapy to a specific type of violence, namely the subtle psychological violence caused by the imposition of Fascist ideology in Italy and Spain.

This article will focus on two works, *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* (2005) by the Italian author Alberto Asor Rosa and *Habíamos ganado la guerra* (2007) by the Spanish author Esther Tusquets, which do not deal with what one would expect to find in works about violence and suffering experienced in fascist times in Italy and Spain, namely high-impact descriptions of atrocities and physical violence. On the contrary, they present a low level of physical violence. However, they do provide an accurate account of the psychological violence caused by the imposition of fascist habits and attitudes, which necessarily implied identity erosion and repression.

Both works recount the authors' lives from their early childhood to adolescence, in the case of Asor Rosa, and the first years of university for Tusquets. The authors narrate their negative experiences of Italian and Spanish Fascism from different social perspectives. Asor Rosa belonged to the Italian working class and therefore experienced at first hand not only the social and cultural repression Fascism imposed but also the consequences of the Second World War (famine, poverty, fear and desperation). Tusquets, on the other hand, belonged to the Catalan bourgeoisie, did not personally experience the Spanish Civil War and only lived from 'outside' the social and cultural repression of Francoist regime and the famine which millions of Spaniards suffered. Although the Catalan author, as she clearly confirms, always led a comfortable existence, she also acknowledges her lack of love from her family and freedom, due to the social policies Fascism promoted in Spain. Both autobiographical works present the evolution of the narrators' characters and their awareness of their suffering caused by Fascist psychological violence.

Fascism, both in Spain and Italy, relied enormously on psychological conditioning. The two regimes divided their societies into fixed categories to which people had to adhere; they each created a vertical social system into which everyone had to be integrated. Not being part

of the fascist system would be tantamount to belonging to an inferior race and the total erasure of individuality and freedom that this inevitably implied would cause suffering. Psychological violence therefore should be interpreted as that manifestation of violence which undermined the intimate realm of individuals.

This study is situated within the current trends in Spain and Italy towards an attempt to readdress a difficult chapter in their histories, the Fascist regimes, and all their painful implications. It will discuss an aspect that has always been considered too subjective and has been rarely analysed but that represents an essential step towards a more comprehensive depiction of violence and suffering in fascist times in both countries. It will begin by considering the phenomenon of subjectivity in narration in terms of, first, the issue of a community's reluctance to accept a literary perspective that is both intimate and subjective of the suffering caused by, particularly psychological, violence and, secondly, the importance, notwithstanding this resistance, of narrating subjectively first-hand experiences of such violence and the suffering it caused. From there it will move on to draw examples from the two works under review to illustrate the importance of such subjective narration, before concluding with some observations on the therapeutic role such narration can acquire for both the writer and the wider community receiving his or her message.

## 1. Subjectivity in Narration

### 1.1 Physical and psychological violence

In the works being analysed in this article, violence and suffering are strictly connected. Violence may manifest itself in different ways: physical, psychological and verbal; it can be deliberate and unintended, explicit and implicit, and again, inflicted by individuals and/or circumstances. When violence is inflicted by certain individuals on others, it is more likely that the victim recognises the causes from which the distress consequently originated. When, however, circumstances exert violence on individuals, victims are confused as they are unable both to identify the cause of their distress and find a solution or at least a palliative. After this preliminary consideration, an important question is how violence can be inflicted by circumstances. Individuals may be deprived of something and humiliated not directly by other individuals but by a conjunction of historical events. An interesting critical view on this is provided by Rosa (1995) who, referring to Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974), maintains:

[L]a catastrofe [...] non deriva dai fatti bellici, è insediata nella normalità del tempo di pace; gli agenti del male non sono figure storiche, ma gli istinti ferali che sempre ci abitano, pronti a insorgere per corrompere ogni possibile relazione umana. [...] (224)

*[Catastrophe does not spring from the events of war, it is entrenched in the normality of peacetime; the agents of evil are not the people who have shaped history but the feral instincts that always dwell within us, ready to manifest themselves suddenly in order to corrupt any human relationship possible.]*

This critical position sheds a light upon an important consideration, namely, our existences are constantly under the threat of evil that we, humans, feed unconsciously. Violence therefore may not only be carried out by individuals but also by events as the negative forces (at the base of violence) are somehow spread in our environment and are part of our personal realm. In these terms, violence does not have to be necessarily inflicted by specific individuals.

Another important difference to note concerning the definition of the concept of violence is the one between physical violence and psychological violence. Physical violence is that type of violence that takes place in the physical realm; examples of this can be: rape, beating, torture and murder. Psychological violence, on the other hand, is less evident to identify and concerns the intimate realm. Wilkinson (2005) observes that:

While the attention of a person 'in' suffering is captivated by pain, the felt reality of this experience cannot be openly shared with other people. The 'unsharability' of suffering may well be one of its most essential attributes, it may be precisely as a result of suffering being locked in the realms of personal experience that it succeeds in causing us so much distress and harm. (2005: 16)

Wilkinson clarifies the different ways in which suffering is manifested and establishes that psychological suffering affects individuals in their private sphere, deprives them of their identity and represses their freedom. Although psychological violence is difficult to acknowledge, it is the worst manifestation of violence that individuals may undergo as it totally upsets the psyche. From the authors' perspective, a literary approach to the psychological violence they have experienced necessitates a candid disclosure of their inmost selves to their audiences and this inevitably entails a more immediate style based on images able to enlighten the readers (even those who are culturally and socially 'distant' from what is narrated) about their distress. This will be evident during the examination of the psychological nature of suffering in the two cases studies.

### 1.2. Subjective narration: difficulties for the reader

The reasons why a reader finds it difficult to be attracted to an autobiographical work can be various: they can be personal, if the plot narrated is perhaps too distant from their own experiences; they can be cultural, if a reader is ignorant of certain events and in many cases may fail to understand the level of gravity of what is told; they can even be subjective, if the reader does not agree with the personal position of the author. Discussing Primo Levi's

success in the United States, Fiano (2007: 92) mentions that the late public interest in his work was due to the fact that people were still not prepared to receive Levi's shocking message.<sup>1</sup> Fiano, when describing the cultural scenario of universities in the United States in the 1970s, recalls Weil's words and notes that there were no academic courses on Holocaust Literature during this period.<sup>2</sup> The only account of the Holocaust available was the diary of a fifteen-year-old Dutch girl, who, despite her affecting narrative, did not entirely express the atrocity of the concentration camps (92). Fiano's discussion reveals the reasons why the American public found it difficult to accept Levi's work when it first appeared. It is important therefore to point out how this can represent a quite widespread difficulty. The American readers in this case felt the events narrated by Levi to be too distant from their daily lives.

When Levi's works appeared in the United States, the first albeit superficial information about Nazi atrocities was indeed starting to circulate but it was still too early for the public to comprehend what had really happened. There were no detailed data about it and it was something that had not yet entered people's lives. It is exactly for this reason that a work such as *Il Sistema Periodico* (1975) that is centred on the Jewish issue was the first work to reach the wider public. The issues presented in this work are relatively 'soft' in comparison with the following books that directly approach the atrocities of the Holocaust. Fiano's discussion sheds a light on how public expectations play an essential role in deciding whether to accept a work or not and his reference to Primo Levi, whose *oeuvre* is objectively recognised as essential testimony, renders his argument even more persuasive. This clarification may enlighten our discussion about testimonial and autobiography by offering a view of the possible scenarios authors may find in their audience and possibly how these can influence the authors' stylistic and thematic choices.

### 1.3. Importance of subjectivity in narration

Autobiographical works acquire an important value not only for those who write them but for the entire society they address. Carrier (2005), who refers to Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984) in order to specify his discussion about the Holocaust monuments and national memory, defines the term 'sites of memory' carefully; sites of memory, he maintains, are significant entities that are symbolic of the memory heritage of a specific society (187). These entities may be physical or non-physical and are a sort of medium between memory and the

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to Primo Levi as he represents one of the pillars of testimonial literature.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Weil is Levi's editor.

individual or a society. It would not be rash to categorise testimonial works as proper *lieux de mémoire*.

Asor Rosa claims that memory inevitably implies an important advantage, namely, ‘Se sei in grado di ricordare, vuol dire che sei vivo’ (16) [*If you are able to remember, it means that you are alive*]. This idea obviously does not only concern the single individual but may also be extended to a collective level; in fact, he goes on to argue that:

Dentro la nostra memoria pulsa una molteplice vita, di cui sono beneficiari innumerevoli soggetti. Con me, nel mio ricordo, vivono uomini e donne, molti dei quali non sono più fisicamente presenti, che continuano a parlare, ad agire e persino a cambiare nell'estrema varietà delle loro metamorfosi mentali. (17)

[*Within our memory throbs a complex life whose beneficiaries are countless subjects. There are living with me, within my memory, men and women, many of whom are no longer physically present, who continue to speak, do things and even alter in the extreme variety of their mental metamorphosis.*]

Asor Rosa reminds us of the multiple layers of memory when he suggests that our memory is a receptacle of both what we have been and the entire reality connected to our past. Memory refers not only to our own existence but also to all other people who have participated in and are connected to it. This idea emphasises the concept that individual memory may also be projected into a collective reality, transforming itself in collective memory. If remembering is, therefore, important for the individual in order to feel ‘alive’, so is it for the community to which that individual belongs:

Nella memoria c'è la radice di ogni mito: anche di quello piccolo, piccolo, modesto, per chiunque altro insignificante, ma per se stessi decisivo, in cui consiste per ognuno di noi esserci stati, aver preso significato e consistenza nel tempo, essersi immaginati che eravamo una cosa piuttosto che un'altra e, da un certo momento in poi, aver pensato che quella cosa che eravamo stati era la cosa migliore che avremmo potuto essere [...]. (23)

[*There is, within memory, the root of each myth: even the smallest, the smallest and most humble one, of no significance to anyone else but essential to one's own self, which consists of one's own having been there, having acquired meaning and substance in time, supposing that we were one particular thing rather than another and, from a certain moment on, having thought that, whatever we had been, it was the best that we ever could have been [...]*]

Within memory, there is the essence of not only each individual but also the community of which that individual forms part. Through memory, not only individuals but also communities acquire a new awareness of their past, mature and realise their roles. Remembering, therefore, is an essential process at both an individual and collective level since it allows us to reinvigorate both our individual identity and the society to which we belong.

This premise theorises an essential aspect of the discussion of this article, namely the importance and urgency of recounting as something physiological for individuals (authors) who experienced violence. Such urgency is clearly tangible in Tusquets' and Asor Rosa's

autobiographical works and, therefore, a reflection on the importance of recounting events is required.

## 2. Psychological violence and intimate suffering

Writing a book can illuminate certain realities, communicate a specific message with different intensities and even change the world.<sup>3</sup> Elsa Morante says through the words of Davide Segre (otherwise known as Carlos Vivaldi), one of her characters in *La Storia (History: a Novel)* (1974), that: ‘Writing a book [...] may change the existence of all mankind’ (461).<sup>4</sup> It is important, at this stage of the discussion, to analyse in more detail what the message is that the authors in question want to communicate to their public in order to establish later their purpose.

It is understandable and logical that Asor Rosa, only son of a poor worker’s family living in precarious conditions, should have written a collection of his memories: he was an ‘observer’ in the sense that Thomas explains when discussing Sobejano’s division of authors into the *observadores* [observers], *militantes* [militants] and *intérpretes* [interpreters] (Thomas 1990: 31); he maintains, quoting Sobejano, that:

[L]os novelistas “observadores” se distinguen por imprimir a sus relatos un sesgo cronístico y anecdótico, propio de quienes, durante un tiempo históricamente importante se apresuran a registrar las experiencias personales para informar la posteridad (Sobejano 1970: 45).

[Novelists who are ‘observers’ can be recognised by the way their narratives have a stamp of the chronicle and the anecdotal, a characteristic peculiar to authors intent on bringing to posterity as quickly as possible their record of the historic times in which they are living.]

When we remember that Fascism in both countries used violent repressive methods, we can appreciate that it is natural, therefore, for authors to write about their personal experiences in order to attempt to free their minds of those anxieties about freedom restriction (fascist censorship) which persecuted them and also to make the entire society aware of what they have been through. Applying this to Asor Rosa’s narration, it is clear that it originates as a necessary act in order to start a new life, a new world’s dawn indeed. Writing memories becomes a liberating act.

As for Tusquets, it is slightly harder to justify her critical and autobiographical work. As already mentioned, the Spanish writer was a member of the Catalan bourgeoisie and, in contrast to Asor Rosa, had a comfortable life. However, like the Italian author, she suffered a psychological pressure that can be defined as psychological violence.

<sup>3</sup> According to the author’s abilities.

<sup>4</sup> He is generally known as Carlo Vivaldi, a name assumed to hide his real identity because he is a Jewish anarchist.

## 2.1 Fear, first memories and images

In Asor Rosa's work it is possible to acknowledge the presence of images acting as very first memories, which disclose feelings of fear and terror that may be easily linked to psychological violence imposed by the circumstances:

Il corridoio si allungava fino alla porta massiccia, da cui entravano improvvisamente, quando si spalancava, le luci e i suoni della scala: verso il fondo, vicino alla porta, quando era chiusa, c'era una zona d'oscurità, in cui non osavo addentrarmi, e dove i muri, invece di correre paralleli l'uno all'altro, sembravano restringersi e far corpo tra loro. (29)

*[The corridor stretched as far as the massive door, through which, when it was opened, sounds came all of a sudden from the stairs. Towards the back and near to the door was a dark area into which I dared not go, an area where the walls, instead of being parallel with each other, seemed to be closing in on themselves.]*

The protagonist revealing his first visual memories unveils a sensation of fear. He experiences one of the commonest childhood fears, that of the dark and the unknown, a fear that is encapsulated in the image of the long and dark corridor from which sounds on the stairs are perceptible and which symbolises the protagonist's insecurity about reality that, due to his tender age, produces fears. However, there is no mention of any particular event experienced by the young protagonist that can make us think about a shock or violence suffered linked to this image.

As for Tusquets, she recounts a similar fear; she was afraid of her dark house.<sup>5</sup> She narrates: 'En aquel pasillo oscuro y larguísimo, donde acechaban mis miedos infantiles [*In that long, dark corridor, where my childhood fears used to lie in wait for me*]' (25) or also: 'La casa oscura, la casa de la soledad, la casa del abandono [...] [*The dark house, the house of solitude, the house of desolation [...]*]' (31). Even in the case of the Spanish author, we come across the image of a dark and unfamiliar environment which paradoxically is the author's home.

According to Oesterreich (2003): 'Several factors contribute to a child developing fears by age 2. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 have experienced real fear or pain from being lost, injured, or bitten. ([1])'. It is obvious that this is not the case so far as Asor Rosa and Tusquets are concerned, as, according to them, they never received any mistreatment from adults. However, Oesterreich raises a very important point with her article, namely, the assimilation by children of all the anxieties, worries, fears, dangers, repressions and negativity in general present in the environment they live in. She goes on to observe that: 'children also are aware of dangers that they hear about or see on TV. It's hard to know what is real and

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<sup>5</sup> She always described it this way despite the fact that it was not dark at all.



what is not. ([1])'. Referring this theoretical foundation to the historical frame in which Asor Rosa's and Tusquets' works are set, it is possible to demonstrate that the general climate of repression, poverty and fear during the fascist regimes in Spain and Italy and during the Civil War and the Second World War doubtlessly contributed to the development of fears within children and the pressure applied to them may be interpreted as psychological violence. Tusquets admits that she was aware that 'existían cartillas de racionamiento [*there were ration books*]' (25) and that other people were in desperate conditions. She also remembers: 'Fui una niña angustiada por multitud de miedos [*I was a child wracked by a myriad fears*]' (52). Similarly Asor Rosa writes: 'Ci furono poi molti altri risvegli dolorosi o preoccupanti [*There were many other awakenings that were distressing and worrying*]' (53). On the one hand, these statements clearly refer to the protagonists' anxieties and fears for suffering; on the other, they clearly allude to the climate of pressure in which they were living. These events and this subtle psychological violence may obviously influence the child's psyche even if the subject did not live such experiences at first hand. This can be justified by the destabilisation of the idea of home as a safe and peaceful place that both authors do. The house becomes a place to fear, a place permeated by sadness and an obscure, pressuring force.

Children associate their fears with particular things or situations that might also be completely unrelated to the causative element. The fear of a long and obscure corridor that becomes narrower, for instance, refers only formally to that specific part of the house; it principally refers to something that the child might have associated with it and communicates the fear of the unknown and oppression that the individual might feel in his familiar environment. Children might not have experienced oppressive situations at first hand. However, as Oesterreich points out, they can well perceive it in the environment in which they live. In Asor Rosa's case, for instance, the origin of his oppression comprises various factors, among them his parents' continual arguments caused by their economic restrictions or the persistent climate of terror imposed by the Fascist regime and its censorship. Tusquets, on the other hand, admits that, during her childhood, she always questioned the strict differences between social categories. This may highlight the protagonist's difficulty in living in a comfortable environment while somewhere else there were people starving and living in very precarious conditions. Violence and suffering therefore may not be experienced at first hand by children but their effects may be acquired unconsciously and can manifest themselves in the form of fears and anxieties. These examples are a good illustration of indirect violence suffered by the authors/protagonists, who, even though they do not suffer at first hand or have



only a filtered perception of the violence imposed by the situations (the Second World War and the post-Civil War period), experience psychic trauma.

## 2.2 Psychological violence

Violence, however, manifests itself only indirectly when individuals are not strictly related to its source; in our specific cases, the subtle psychological violence caused by Fascist impositions is experienced indirectly only when the protagonists are children and therefore, still not totally integrated into the Fascist system. When, however, the child's links with the causative element are apparent, psychological violence is direct in that it manifests itself explicitly. The type of violence that Tusquets and Asor Rosa came to experience was obviously not physical but involved total repression of identity by a mass 'homologation' (the imposition of Orwellian mass-mindset and Huxleyean mass-culture)<sup>6</sup> which implied absolutely no possibility of opposing the national order; in these respects, Benadusi (2005) states that: '[il Fascismo fece] una vasta opera di omologazione di comportamenti, abitudini e stili di vita [[*Fascism instigated*] a vast programme aimed at the 'homologation' of behaviour, habits and lifestyles]' (13).

Asor Rosa explains how, under Fascism, Italian schools aimed at preparing their pupils for serving the Fascist cause. Along with ordinary classes, demonstrations were organised to exalt the regime and to promote a sense of nationalistic admiration towards *il Duce* and the state. He remembers: 'Qualche settimana dopo l'inizio della scuola fu organizzata la cerimonia del nostro primo giuramento al Duce [*A few weeks after we had started school, the ceremony in which we pledged our loyalty to the Duce for the first time was organised*]' (40). Similar manifestations were the routine in Fascist schools. Benadusi observes:

Nell'ottica nazionalista i giovani dovevano essere pronti alla guerra, un'eventualità cui l'Italia si doveva preparare [...] Era dunque necessario allenare e rigenerare gli Italiani dal punto di vista della mente, ma anche del fisico, per sviluppare quelle qualità di forza e coraggio necessarie per vincere e dominare, secondo il vecchio adagio *mens sana in corpore sano*. (17)

[*From the Nationalist point of view, the young had to be ready for war, a possibility for which Italy had to prepare [...] It was therefore necessary to train and regenerate Italians not only mentally but also physically, so that they would develop the strength and courage necessary to win and dominate, following the old adage mens sana in corpore sano*]

In order to achieve such an aim, young boys needed to be trained physically and mentally; they had to be strong and represent the ideal citizen of the Fascist revolution, who was able to draw on tradition but was also able to use it for the glorious future of the nation. However, as Asor Rosa recalls:

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<sup>6</sup> *Un mondo nuovo* is the title of the Italian translation of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Le esercitazioni del sabato pomeriggio erano pesanti e noiosissime. Trascinavo svogliatamente i piedi nella polvere e sentivo le mie ambizioni guerriere disfarsi a poco a poco. Una volta un caposquadra, un ragazzo di quattordici-quindici anni, mi tirò un pugno in testa perché non rispettavvo l'allineamento. [...] (43).

*[Saturday afternoon training sessions were tedious and boring. I would drag my feet listlessly in the dust and feel my warrior ambitions little by little melt away. Once a team captain, a lad of fourteen or fifteen, punched me in the head because I did not comply with his line-up [...].]*

The Italian author expresses in these lines his total disinterest in attending the physical training sessions organised by his school; having established here his disenchantment, he later relates how, when an explanation was demanded for his absences at the training session, which little by little became more frequent, he would offer some banal excuse. Furthermore the protagonist highlights an important matter, namely, the abuses that weaker and younger boys used to suffer at the hands of older ones. Once again, this highlights the fascist idea of virility being something with which boys were inculcated from a tender age in environments such as schools and after-school associations, and through books. Boys needed to learn early on how to fight and defend themselves. These sorts of ideas were therefore normal and even very welcome at that time since they instigated violence and this represented the full realisation of the fascist male. It is not difficult to deduce that this mentality represented a manifestation of psychological violence and did not put at ease those who did not believe in it.<sup>7</sup> Asor Rosa, who clearly was not the typical virile man Fascism tried to promote, expresses in his work his frustration *vis à vis* the mistreatments from his colleagues and highlights the distress at being unable to react, especially in the presence of his father. Later on he will decide not to attend the gymnastic sessions any more, thus earning his father's approval and avoiding his own distress and humiliation:

Un bel giorno, sommando insieme le mie insoddisfazioni e le sue attese, quando ero già di fronte, in divisa, al cancello del recinto Gil, gli comunicai senza tanti complimenti che non avevo voglia di andare all'esercitazione del sabato [...] (44)

*[One day, when I was already in uniform at the gate to the Gil training ground, I would tell him straight that, taking together my dissatisfaction and his expectations, I wanted to quit the Saturday training sessions.]*

Here it is possible to identify through the protagonist's acknowledgement of suffering, humiliation and dissatisfaction a manifestation of psychological violence not only towards the protagonist but also towards other members of society who had to comply with these rituals and obligations. The author states that his main interests were walking with his father or reading, in other words exactly the opposite of what fascism proclaimed. He also narrates that after making his oath to Fascism (compulsory for each pupil going to a state school), he was

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<sup>7</sup> It is pertinent to highlight that in this case physical violence is also involved.

for a long time tormented by ethical problems, which highlights once more the effects of the psychological violence on individuals:

Di fatto giurai, sputando fuori le parole con tutta l'aria che avevo nei polmoni. Per quanto possa apparire strano, a lungo poi, fino all'adolescenza, fui tormentato dal problema morale se, avendo comunque giurato, benché del tutto indipendentemente dalla mia volontà, non sarebbe stato più giusto mantener fede all'impegno preso, e mi rammaricavo con me stesso di non essermi limitato a spalancare la bocca, come alcuni dei mie compagni accanto a me misteriosamente avevano fatto. (42)

*[I indeed gave my oath, spitting out the words with all the air I had in my lungs. What could seem strange, however, is that for a long time after, right up to my adolescence, I was tormented by the moral problem whether or not I was still obliged to keep the oath that I had given, having regard to the fact that I had actually given it, albeit this was an act completely independent of my own volition, and I would reproach myself for not having limited myself to just opening my mouth, in the way that some my schoolmates near me had mysteriously done.]*

The author expresses on this occasion the discomfort and distress caused by imposed values. Here it is possible for the first time in *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo* to detect an explicit reference to not only the psychological violence suffered but also its effects, namely identity, internal conflicts and consequent distress. These effects, however, could not be explicit. The author recounts:

[A]nche se sentivo piegarmi le ginocchia, reprimevo un analogo turbamento, fedele al severo comando materno: "Non farti vedere", che più o meno voleva dire: nascondi il più accuratamente possibile i tuoi sentimenti, soprattutto se di genere lamentevole e querimonioso, non è bello "farsi vedere" per quel che si è e tanto meno per quel che si prova, bisogna stringere i denti e mostrare un volto tranquillo e sorridente, anche se si è angosciati nella peggior maniera. (38)

*[Even if I felt my knees sagging, I would suppress the analogous anxiety, following my mother's strict command: "Don't draw attention to yourself", which meant: take care to hide your feelings, especially if they are full of self-pity; it is not good to 'draw attention' to what you are and even less to what you are feeling; you must grit your teeth and show a calm, smiling face, even if you are suffering the most dreadful anxiety.]*

In this description, Asor Rosa conveys the way in which he was forced to repress his feelings, which inevitably increased his suffering further. This may be interpreted as a demonstration of violence within violence, as the protagonist is even denied the right to find solace.

Tusquets, as well, narrates the weight that the Spanish Fascist society imposed on her and, similarly to the Italian author, communicates her discontent. She explains:

[L]as niñas íbamos a clase de danza (clásica, claro) [...] Los chicos, incluso los más negados para el estudio, cursaban todos bachillerato, no estaba prevista otra posibilidad. Las chicas hacíamos, casi todas "enseñanza del hogar". Ni siquiera unos padres como los míos se plantearon la posibilidad de que yo, aunque pareciera dotada para el estudio [...] pudiera ir a la universidad. (107)

*[Girls would go to dancing classes (ballet, naturally) [...] Boys, including the most hopeless academically, continued their education in the 'Bachillerato'; they had no other option. Nearly all the girls took 'enseñanza del hogar'. My parents like others did not even address*

*themselves to the possibility that I could go to university, even though I seemed to be academically inclined.]*<sup>8</sup>

This passage clearly depicts the author's irritation at fascist tradition and its absurdity which manifested itself in expressions such as the one that Tusquets' parents often used to say: 'Qué pena que la chica sea la lista y el chico el guapo [*What a pity that it's the girl who is clever and the boy good-looking*]' (107). Women were only expected to aspire to become perfect wives and mothers; they had to be good-looking in order to find a respectable husband and such a mentality was not only inculcated at school but something rooted in society as the attitude of Tusquets' parents attests. Women could not occupy significant positions within society at any level, since this would have altered the fascist social order. This, for the Spanish author, represented a serious threat to her identity, in that she always felt it to be totally different from the one imposed on her. Tusquets perceived the Fascist 'homologation' as a real manifestation of psychological violence towards her and towards those individuals involved in such mass repression of identity. However, Tusquets explains later on in her work that, despite the opposition of her family and the entire system, she did not intend to limit her possibilities and refused to force herself and her expectations to do something that she did not want to only because tradition imposed it, as many other girls did.

El verano anterior había decidido que quería dejar los cursos de 'enseñanza del hogar' y hacer el bachillerato. El motivo que entonces aduje, y en el que creí durante un tiempo, era descabellado: hacerme luego enfermera para ayudar a papá. Para justificar estudiar lo mismo que los chicos necesitaba – ante mí misma, no ante mis padres, que sabían que me mareaba sólo con ver una gota de sangre y que me ponía enferma el olor de un hospital – elegir de antemano una de las profesiones reservadas a las mujeres. (187)

*[I had decided, the previous summer, that I wanted to drop 'enseñanza del hogar' and continue my education in the 'Bachillerato'. The reason that I put forward, and in which I believed for a time, was preposterous: to become a nurse and help Father. Justifying my desire to study the same as boys — to myself, not to my parents who knew that the sight of just a drop of blood would make me feel faint and that the smell of a hospital would make me feel sick — needed me first to choose one of the professions restricted to women.]*

This passage is very important if we consider the whole context of the discussion about tradition, since it shows the protagonist's fear and insecurity in admitting her decision and therefore the intensity of psychological violence imposed by fascist tradition. Like Asor Rosa, Tusquets highlights the great influence fascist tradition had on people to the extent that it completely changed their perception of freedom, consequently causing discomfort and

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<sup>8</sup> The 'Bachillerato' is an additional two years of secondary education after the completion of compulsory education to prepare the student for university. 'Enseñanza de hogar', which could be translated, roughly, as 'Home Craft', was a practical not an academic course of 'study', which cannot be equated with the modern 'Home Economics', comprising as it did topics such as cleaning, cooking, child care, sewing etc. The term was used by and is associated with the Francoist dictatorship.

diffidence. Tusquets' explanation appears hesitant when she tells how she tried to justify her decision to pursue a course of academic study by ascribing to it a reason that would have been acceptable to society. The most significant point of this explanation, however, is when she states that she needed to convince herself of the fact that she wanted to study simply for her own benefit and not because she wanted to become a nurse (typical work for a fascist woman). This demonstrates how the author was also, in a way, pressured by tradition and its subtle psychological violence and was consequently a victim of anxiety and distress. It is possible to confirm this through the words of the author herself when she says: 'Y precisamente aquel verano, después del éxito en los exámenes, [...] me sentía más feliz que nunca [*And that very summer, after my success in the final examinations, [...] I felt happier than ever before*]' (188). The sense of happiness that is conveyed to the reader by this statement can be interpreted as an indication that all anxiety and distress about her decision had momentarily vanished.

The psychological violence that stemmed from the oppression of fascist tradition is also perpetrated by Tusquets' mother in the dissatisfaction and estrangement she displays when confronted by her daughter's decision:

[M]i madre levantaba una ceja: ¿por qué demonios esa hija suya tenía que hacerlo todo del modo más raro? Muy fácil la respuesta, mamá porque tú no me matriculaste a los diez años en bachillerato, ni me preguntaste siquiera lo que yo quería, convencida de que para escribir o para traducir, que era lo que decidiste sería - por elección propia, claro, no porque tú lo impusieras - mi profesión [...] un título de bachiller no iba a servirme para nada. (188)

[*My mother raised her eyebrows: why on earth did that daughter of hers have to do everything differently? The answer is easy, Mother: because for ten years you did not send me to the grammar school and never even asked me what I wanted to do; convinced as you were that in order to write or translate, these being what you decided my profession would be — freely chosen, of course, not because you said so — a Baccalaureate would be of no use to me.*]

This subtle violence thus perpetrated represented a cause of suffering for the Spanish author, who comments: 'Es difícil sentirse orgulloso de uno mismo cuando eres consciente de que no te pareces a la hija que tu madre hubiera querido tener [*It is difficult to feel the slightest bit proud of yourself, when you're aware that you don't look like the daughter your mother wanted*]' (217). This statement clearly alludes to the author's distress, the effects of which still persist and which is due to a continuous psychological violence suffered during the years of her youth.

Both Asor Rosa and Tusquets demonstrate that the psychological violence suffered by the imposition on them of fascist ideology and tradition inevitably involved total cancellation of their own identities and freedom and that this, in turn, caused them distress. The two works

analysed highlight an implied violence that is more subtle and therefore difficult to understand as it does not present itself in physical terms but only within the protagonists' own inner realm. In these respects, Wilkinson (2005) observes:

While being able to recognize and respond to the outward signs of a person's distress, we can never actually enter into the realms of their personal experience of suffering. The very fact that suffering is such a deeply personal experience may well be part of the explanation for why it remains so difficult for commentators to agree on a definition of what 'it' is (2005, 16).

Wilkinson's theoretical position clearly highlights the difficulty in grasping that suffering also takes place within the psychological realm. This may refer back to the point discussed earlier about the difficulty of readers' fully understanding the purpose and the meaning of testimonial literature and autobiography and may justify it further. The narration of personal events, however, may contribute towards the process of healing from suffering.

### **3. Recounting psychological violence: a therapy to overcome its effects**

Sturrock (1993) maintains that '[a] life storied is a life made meaningful' (20); what he does not define, however, is for whom such life stories should be meaningful. Testimonial and autobiographical works document certain events, providing readers with a critical vision of them. The audience therefore does not read descriptions composed immediately after the conclusion of the events but a relatively mediated and reflected version of them that inevitably involves criticism.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of narrating events in the first person therefore, considering the work as a product to be approached by an audience, is precisely the divulging and documenting of certain events and the authors' critical views about them. This, however, leads perhaps to a more important assumption, namely that the real essence of testimonial literature and autobiography is the meditation on and rationalisation of their existences by authors. Such an aspect, which has often been disregarded, is not immediately apparent, because as the importance of this type of literature is usually identified in its documentary and testimonial value, the authors generally focus their approach on the receiver of their message. This aspect represents in reality an essential element that is able to enrich the concept of autobiography and testimonial literature and allows shifting the attention from the audience, the receiver of the literary product, to the author, the producer. Recounting their personal experiences constitutes a therapy for the individuals suffering from them; by looking back at their lives and trying to make sense of past events, they gradually acquire a new awareness about these experiences which is not only able to filter out their painful aspects but also

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<sup>9</sup> This can be substantiated by observing the number of value judgements present in the two autobiographical works being discussed.



contextualise them within the present and future existence of the narrator. What our authors recount changes from mere chronological facts (as they appear at the beginning of the works) to ones belonging to the heritage of a specific person and they are able to radically and deeply modify him or her.

The violence presented at the beginning of these two autobiographical works is therefore transfigured into an obligatory path which authors have to walk in order to gain their new awareness. The autobiographical-therapeutic process provides the author with new certainties about their lives. Asor Rosa's and Tusquets' works conclude with the acknowledgment of a new truth: in the case of Tusquets, her real social identity that moves away from her familiar one; in the case of Asor Rosa, the regained peace, freedom and normality. Recounting the past through literature is essential to reviving our individual existences and to making us feel alive. Asor Rosa offers a fascinating theoretical perspective in the introductory essay to *L'Alba di un Mondo Nuovo*:

La memoria rappresenta un filtro affettuoso del passato. Atroce è la realtà. Raramente lo è la memoria. Lo stesso Primo Levi, Principe dei ricordi, non può fare in modo che la sua narrazione di avvenimenti atroci sia atroce come quegli avvenimenti; anzi, accenna al fatto decisivo che per distaccarsi dall'atrocità bisogna ricordare (se non erro, parla precisamente di "liberazione interiore", [...]). (2002: 15)

*[Memory acts as an affectionate filter for the past. Reality is terrible. Memory rarely is. That Prince of memories, Primo Levi himself, when narrating events that were terrible, cannot make the narration as terrible as those events were; on the contrary, he points out as a deciding factor, that it is essential to distance oneself from atrocity in order to remember (if I am not mistaken, I think he actually talks about "interior liberation", [...])]*

The past is an important element in human life and it should serve the present and the future by enlightening them. Tusquets and Asor Rosa neither ignore their past nor relegate it to a mere literary exercise; they confer on it an active role, the repository of not just their experiences but above all the essence of their existences. The past inexorably shapes personalities and characters and this is evident in our authors' works. The fact that both Tusquets and Asor Rosa decide to write autobiographical works relatively late in their lives and in recent years, may reveal further the active role of the past, which is not a finite reality but an on-going one that keeps on communicating with, showing and teaching the person who lived it a specific lesson. Memory helps, in other words, to render meaningful the protagonist's existence.

Memory, moreover, represents an important tool with which to moderate the effects on our present and future of a painful past suffered. The distance between past and present, identified with those experiences in the midst of these two opposite realities that contribute to



the individual's own maturity, is integrated into memory and allows mitigation of the perception of past atrocities. Asor Rosa acknowledges in his biographical work the importance of the past but also recognises its essential projection onto the present and asserts that memory constitutes the only way to come to total knowledge (2002: 6). His idea of total knowledge refers to that knowledge that covers not only the past and the present but also the distance between these two separated dimensions and this is precisely what memory does in order to preserve our existences from oblivion. Asor Rosa justifies this idea by delineating a progressive process according to which we cannot think of the past without taking into account the lapse of time between the moment in which a specific event is concluded and the one in which we are recalling (2002: 6).

Similarly Tusquets adopts a term which has the same value: 'final stage'. The Spanish author recognises the distance between past and present and the gap between them. Her conception of final stage consists of the moment in which one acquires the awareness of existence, taking into consideration past, present and the period between them.

These two ideas that both authors employ in their works delineate the positive consequence of narrating their existences, that is, a new beginning, freed from anxiety and distress originated by fascist psychological violence. The autobiographical process these two authors undertake is, therefore, a personal one that allows them not to erase their pain but to learn to live with it as forming part of their personality. Once the autobiographical process has rendered an individual's existence meaningful in their eyes, they can track down their experiences, contextualise them, evaluate to what extent they contributed to their personal and psychological development and finally acquire solace from them. This maturation process is evident in Asor Rosa and Tusquets, as they start their narration with unclear, opaque and confused pictures of reality (typical of children) and move away gradually to more conscious and meditated ones that will allow them to achieve 'total knowledge' in the 'final stage' of their autobiographical-therapeutic process.

In these terms recounting personal events can be considered a therapeutic process that offers its benefits to the writers. Testimonial literature and autobiography therefore acquire a double value, namely to liberate individuals from anxiety and distress through a long and gradual awareness process and to shed a light on the intimate representations of violence (in this case psychological) inflicted by fascism. Narrating personal experiences can be interpreted as a survival instinct. If, as Asor Rosa affirms, it is essential to remember in order to feel alive, it is understandable why recounting personal experiences is so important for

those who have been victims of physical and psychological violence. Violence implies ideas of repression, deprivation and abuses and is fed by a destructive drive. Violence aims at repressing individuals, ideas and even memory. Victims of violence, therefore, need to remember rather than abandoning themselves to oblivion and leaving violence to complete its destruction. Recounting and remembering offer us the possibility to start again, to live without distress and to enrich our identities with a new awareness of our past.

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## Confronting Violence in Reading and Representation: Brutality and Witnessing in the Work of Edwidge Danticat<sup>1</sup>

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According to literary critic and novelist Hilary Mantel, ‘to lay claim to other people’s suffering [...] is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism’ (Mantel 1997: 40).<sup>2</sup> I shall consider this claim with reference to two novels by Haitian-born, American immigrant writer Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (1998) and *The Dew Breaker* (2004). Both texts engage with the traumatic legacies of violent acts against Haitians in the name of nationalist hegemony, either in Haiti or in the Dominican Republic. I will be considering whether a text can look at violence perpetrated without perpetuating violence itself and exploring different kinds of violence through the novels.

### 1. *The Farming of Bones*: the violence of Hispaniola

Danticat’s second novel *The Farming of Bones* recounts the genocide of between 20,000 and 35,000 ethnic Haitians<sup>3</sup> living in the Dominican Republic in 1937, sanctioned by the dictator Rafael Trujillo. These ethnic Haitians who lived along the border region between the two countries were intimately linked with the Dominican population, having intermarried with them for several generations. While historians disagree about the genesis of events, there is a broad consensus that Trujillo wanted to de-Africanise the Dominican Republic and ‘whiten’ its population. This ideology is deep-rooted in the violent history of Hispaniola where, since 1697, two colonies have shared one island. The French colony revolted against slavery and achieved independence in 1804, becoming Haiti; the Spanish colony (latterly the Dominican Republic) first became independent in 1821 but was then occupied by Haiti, inspiring a racist discourse which presented Haiti as ‘the other’ (San Miguel 2005: 38–39).<sup>4</sup> According to the

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented as a paper at Pharmakon: Literature and Violence, a postgraduate conference organised by the School of English at the University of Kent and held on 20th May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Mantel makes this statement in her review of Caryl Phillips’s novel *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997). While she criticises Phillips as a West Indian-born British/American writer for representing the Holocaust in his narrative, the comment included above is intended as a more general claim. For Mantel it seems that only certain groups of people have a right to represent certain events, a claim which negates imaginative enterprise in writing and precludes comparative approaches. In this article, I will consider this statement, not in the context of this specific review but in its most general application.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is contested: see Michele Wucker (Wucker 1999) and Richard Lee Turits (Turits 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Prior to Columbus’s arrival on the island in 1492, Hispaniola was inhabited by the Tainos. Danticat made the history of violent colonisation the subject of her children’s novel *Anacaona: Golden Flower* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2005). The Spanish began to import slaves in the sixteenth century, and by the seventeenth

historian San Miguel, this ideology defined the nations as follows: ‘Haitians practiced Voodoo, Dominicans Catholicism; Haitians spoke Creole, Dominicans Spanish; Haitians were black, Dominicans were of mixed race or white. More than this, Haitian culture and society were seen as an extension of Africa, whereas Santo Domingo clung to its pure Spanish origins’ (39). This deep-seated ideology was perpetuated in Trujillo’s government which saw Haitians as blacker and ‘less developed’;<sup>5</sup> and the perceived need to ‘Dominicanize’ and expunge the ‘contaminating effects’ of Haitian migration manifested in the terrible events which Danticat addresses in her novel.

The title of the novel refers to the farming of cane sugar, a hazardous process that leaves many of the characters in the novel marked with horrific scars and injuries. Furthermore, as Danticat has discussed in an interview (Anglesey 1998),<sup>6</sup> the Haitian cane workers were and continue to be exploited by the Dominican Republic and the United States.<sup>7</sup> From the 1910s, Haitians, who accepted lower wages and poorer working conditions than Dominicans, were imported into the cane plantations (San Miguel 2005: 52).<sup>8</sup> American sugar mills profited from cheap Haitian labour. Against this oppressive backdrop, the novel describes the relationships forged by Haitian migrant protagonist Amabelle Désir and documents how these bonds are shattered by the genocide. Amabelle’s Haitian lover Sebastien disappears (and is presumably slaughtered), and she is forced to abandon her surrogate Dominican family (for whom she works as a servant), as she flees to Haiti to escape the massacre. As the husband of Amabelle’s mistress leads the operation to murder the ethnic Haitians, the bonds of love and intimacy that tied Amabelle to family and nation disintegrate. In a key scene in the novel, Amabelle and her companion Yves have reached the Haitian border but, before they can cross the Massacre River, they are surrounded. As the last of her belongings slip from her grasp, and with

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century the French were establishing themselves in the West of the island: this region became ‘Haiti’ upon gaining independence from French rule.

<sup>5</sup> While Trujillo agreed with the theories of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, he also gave visas to Jewish refugees from Hitler’s Germany as part of a plan to colonise and ‘whiten’ the Dominican Republic (Wucker 1999: 52, 56). It is also important to note that while racial prejudices towards Haitians pre-existed the massacre, Trujillo’s ideological campaign to justify the massacre began afterwards (Turits 2003: 159).

<sup>6</sup> In this interview Danticat discusses how she wrote her novel conscious of the ongoing economic and social inequality of Haitian cane workers in the Dominican Republic (Anglesey 1998: 37).

<sup>7</sup> This migrant Haitian population continues to be exploited in a way that echoes plantation slavery. See Wucker (1999: 95, 112–13).

<sup>8</sup> Wucker points out that this fed into Trujillo’s reasoning for the genocide. There was a dip in sugar prices, and the Dominican Republic faced a crisis: ‘How would the Dominican Republic support all these foreigners, producing crops worth nothing, when its own people did not have jobs?’ (102). Trujillo tried to combat this problem by passing a law in 1933 which “‘Dominicaniz[ed]” the cane harvest, requiring that 70 percent of workers in the cane fields be Dominican.’ However, while Trujillo had also started to deport Haitian cane workers, more continued to arrive, ‘until Trujillo decided to solve the problem permanently in October 1937, just as the cane harvest was about to begin’ (Wucker 1999: 104).

them her link to the Dominican Republic, Amabelle is confronted by soldiers waving parsley in front of her face:

“Tell us what this is,” one said. “Que diga perejil.”

At that moment I did believe that had I wanted to, I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly, the way I often asked “Perejil?” of the old Dominican women [...] at the roadside gardens and markets, even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue. It was the kind of thing that if you were startled in the night, you might forget, but with all my senses calm, I could have said it. But I didn't get my chance. Yves and I were shoved down onto our knees. Our jaws were pried open and parsley stuffed into our mouths. My eyes watering, I chewed and swallowed as quickly as I could, but not nearly as fast as they were forcing the handfuls into my mouth. (Danticat 1998: 193)

What confronts Amabelle here is a test, used by Trujillo's *Guardias* to distinguish between Haitians and Dominicans on the basis of skin colour or the ability to pronounce certain Spanish words. Amabelle undercuts this flawed notion of racial distinction exhibited in language, as she can pronounce ‘parsley’ in both Kreyòl and Spanish. If this racial distinction seems brutal, the test in itself proves to be less important than the act of asserting cultural difference. Whether or not Amabelle can pronounce the word correctly is irrelevant. The force-feeding of parsley is performative: the enactment of violence establishes Amabelle's ‘otherness’. What follows is a brutal beating and stoning from which Amabelle never recovers full physical mobility. While Amabelle survives this beating and lives out a marginal existence in Haiti for the remainder of her years, she can never escape the legacy of the violence she suffered and witnessed during the Parsley Massacre or, as it is known in the Dominican Republic, *El Corte* (The Cutting).<sup>9</sup> If Amabelle has been cut away from the Dominican Republic, she remains without roots, on the edges of both nations, unable to envisage a future, unable to forget the past.

## 2. The violence of representation

As part of her research for this novel, Danticat interviewed the relatives and survivors of this massacre (including members of her own family), collecting oral histories which she incorporated into her narrative. Danticat also modelled the character of Amabelle on a woman who was slaughtered at a family dinner table by a colonel who wished to show his compliance with Trujillo's order to massacre Haitians (Shea 1999: 14). But what are the implications of this ‘laying claim to other people's suffering’ for the purposes of writing? In representing this violent history and what Scarry sees as the linguistic untranslatability of another's physical

<sup>9</sup> The Dominican name for the Massacre somewhat glosses over its violence. Haitians call the genocide Kout Kouto (the stabbing or knife blow). However, Pamela J. Rader has argued that the term ‘corte’ can also connote both ‘harvest’ which ‘implies reaping by cutting as with the cane’ and ‘rebuff’; the term, is therefore, ‘not only euphemistic, but exemplary of language's ability to rebuff and silence’ (Radar 2009: 45).

pain<sup>10</sup> within a fictional framework has Danticat herself perpetuated a kind of symbolic violence, by fixing these unutterable stories in her novel? Žižek has pointed to the way in which violence is manifested not just physically but also in language, symbolically. He suggests:

[We should consider] problematic the idea of language, symbolic order, as the medium of reconciliation/mediation, of peaceful co-existence, [in which] instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we debate, we exchange words, [...]. As Hegel was already well aware, there is something violent in the very symbolization of a thing, which equals its mortification; this violence operates at multiple levels. (Žižek 2008: 51–56)

This symbolic violence is an example of what Žižek terms ‘objective violence’, ‘the violence inherent to [the] normal state of things’. For Žižek ‘[o]bjective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively [obviously] violent’ (2). In other words, for Žižek our ideological training blinds us to how ‘violence infects language’ (52), and accentuates other kinds of physical and visible or ‘subjective’ violence enacted by recognisable agents. While Mantel and Žižek are arguing very different things, they both suggest that representation itself can be violent. Mantel sees this in the appropriation of others’ stories of suffering for artistic rendition (which may conceal motives of self interest); Žižek, meanwhile, suggests that the act of signification itself can be violent. He argues ‘the fact that *reason (ratio)* and *race* have the same root tells us something: language, not primitive egotistic interests, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbors (can) “live in different worlds” even when we live on the same street’ (56–57). Danticat’s novel shows reflexive understanding of the possibilities of enacting both kinds of violence through fiction. In her depiction of Amabelle’s language test, Danticat explores the violence of language and how it can be used to enforce cultural and racial divisions. However, Danticat goes further than this and reveals that the violence instituted in language is a superficial cover for the enactment of a state ideology that sought to divide and crudely classify the linguistically and socially entwined Haitian and Dominican populations. What Danticat emphasises is how the very *visible* emphasis on apparent linguistic divisions acted as a cover and a justification for state-sponsored brutality. Reading Žižek through Danticat we find that ‘subjective’ and ‘symbolic’ violence are entwined and the latter can feed off the former.

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Scarry argues that because pain lacks objective external referents in the world, it is virtually impossible for pain to be shared between and fully comprehended by two people (Scarry 1985: 161–62). It is nevertheless possible to criticise Scarry’s conception of pain for affirming Western notions of ‘the individual’ which are not necessarily universally applicable.



To return to Mantel's point, Danticat's novel also includes a reflexive questioning of the ethics of representing others' sufferings. Yves, who escaped to Haiti with Amabelle, discourages her from giving her testimony to the priests recording the survivors' accounts of the massacre. He argues: 'You tell the story, and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours' (Danticat 1998: 246). Danticat explained in interview: 'In that passage, I was purposely questioning myself and what I was doing – writing this story in English, stealing it, if you will, from the true survivors who were not able or allowed to tell their stories, people like Yves and Amabelle' (Shea 1999: 17–18). This question of representing/'stealing' other people's suffering echoes Spivak's notion that 'the subaltern cannot speak'. However, as Myriam Chancy points out, Spivak's approach implies that 'from the outset [...] silence is an inevitable side effect of living in various Third World contexts' (Chancy 1997: 31). What Danticat's novel and interviews emphasise is the partial, fragmented and contested nature of the stories of the massacre: it is not that these stories cannot be or have not been spoken but that they are contested, incomplete and officially ignored. For Danticat, the predicament 'of stealing stories' is offset by the pressing need to excavate silenced histories. She explains: 'Nineteen ninety-seven had come and gone and no word said, no wreaths laid. I wrote the book as a memory and a tribute to what happened'.<sup>11</sup> This suggests the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*, the undecidable oscillation between cure and poison. As Danticat's comments show, representation is necessary but carries with it a potential for appropriation.

Danticat however, is not claiming to offer a definitive version of the events of 1937. She is careful to point out in a 1999 interview that 'I didn't write it as history [...] it's a novel', a distinction that I see as indirectly linked to criticisms of the details of Danticat's novel by the Dominican historian Bernard Vega who considered her portrayal of Dominicans' behaviour during the slaughter to be inaccurate.<sup>12</sup> This distinction is also important because, if we follow Mantel's argument logically, we might infer that the only way to avoid 'laying claim to other people's suffering' would be to experience events oneself. Somehow representation and experience should be commensurate. Danticat would resist such a conflation of history and representation: the fiction is not the event itself. This resonates with arguments about the figuration of the Holocaust in literature. Jacqueline Rose, discussing the criticism of Sylvia Plath for her use of Holocaust imagery, suggests that 'Auschwitz bequeathed to subsequent

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jerry Philogene, quoted in Donette A. Francis (Francis 1999: 168).

<sup>12</sup> The correspondence between Vega and Danticat in 1998 was published in 2004 in the Dominican newspaper Hoy (Hoy 2004). For further analysis see Lucía M. Suárez (Suárez 2006: 12–17).

art perhaps the most arresting of all metaphors of extremity’, and contends that ‘what is at stake, finally, is a repudiation of metaphor itself – that is, of the necessary distance between its two terms’ (Rose 1991: 205–06). Thus what emerges in discussions of the unrepresentability (and uniqueness) of the Holocaust is the latent unacceptability of metaphor — the objectionable distance between the event itself and its representation, where figuration somehow seems to connote a removal from truth, a *de-realisation* of what has passed. It is this sense that the metaphors employed misrepresent the ‘reality’ of history that emerges in Vega’s comments on *The Farming of Bones*. But if metaphors, and literary representations, seemingly depart from events, can they not also bring us closer to them, by, however problematically, confronting something that might otherwise be unintelligible? This returns us to the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*. Derrida suggests that the *pharmakon* ‘acts like an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security’ (Derrida 2004: 131); might literary representations of violence be this *pharmakon*, threatening the ‘purity’ of the historical event by supplementing it ‘difference’ through metaphor?

### 3. The Dew Breaker

While Danticat’s explorations of violence in *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker* tackle the brutality of dictatorial regimes in Hispaniola, she has enjoyed most popular and critical success in the United States.<sup>13</sup> This opens up another way of engaging with Mantel’s claim: does a colonial impulse underlie this success? Martin Munro, in his study on Haitian writers, suggests that ‘the more Haiti has slid into misery, the more successful its authors have become’. Perhaps, he proposes, the success of this literature is through its testimony to the universality of human suffering, through which audiences can ‘heal pain’. On the other hand he suggests, ‘perhaps in reading Haitian books we seek some disavowed salvation ourselves’ (Munro 2007: 207). Thus it is possible for Western audiences to appropriate and even exoticise the violent experiences of oppressed Haitians, without necessarily understanding them, the power relationships and injustices behind them, or the complicity of the United States in Hispaniola’s violent regimes. However, while we cannot assume an ethical and sympathetic readership for Danticat’s books, the inverse stance that ‘reading is violence’ is also a fallacy.

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<sup>13</sup> For Danticat, the English language in which she writes is the language of migrancy, which becomes a ‘tool’, a provisional option and a testament to dislocation. It would be problematic for her to write in Kreyòl, due to the high rate of illiteracy (at around ninety per cent).

This position (what Žižek might see as violence of symbolisation) is reductionist because it infers that in their mis-reading of Haitian violence, the audience become partially responsible for it. I make this distinction not to deny the role of the United States in violence against Haitians but to problematise a position which threatens to conflate violent events with an indirect witnessing of representations of such events. Danticat's writing suggests the need to be aware of such distinctions as throughout *The Dew Breaker* she problematises the location of witnessing. This not only troubles the possibility of 'laying claim' to other people's experiences but also allows Danticat to encourage her readers to develop a critical perspective on brutality.

*The Dew Breaker*, like *The Farming of Bones*, confronts silenced histories, this time focusing on violence in Haiti during the dictatorship of François Duvalier (which began in 1957 and was continued by his son Jean-Claude until 1986). The novel focuses on a figure who helped brutally to perpetuate nationalist hegemony: 'the Dew Breaker', a Tonton Macoute and torturer in François Duvalier's regime. This figure unites the fragmented episodes of a text which rests somewhere between a novel and a short story collection, linking various characters who have been directly and indirectly affected by his enactment of violence on behalf of Duvalier's regime. Beatrice, a bridal seamstress, was tortured because she would not date the Dew Breaker; Anne's step-brother was snatched and murdered by him, Dany's parents were shot by him. Yet these events are transmitted to the reader in glimpses, partially witnessed or incompletely testified to by the characters, and the reader has to work hard to piece together these fragments. As with *The Farming of Bones*, in *The Dew Breaker* testimonies are rendered without the possibility of closure. One example of this is Beatrice's partial account of her torture and her erroneous belief that the Dew Breaker continues to pursue her, which suggests that in a fundamental way Beatrice's suffering is enigmatic and evades encapsulation. This is not a testimony that the reader can witness and know. This indicates how Danticat avoids 'laying claim' to other people's histories by reflexively incorporating silences into her representations.

Within *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat problematises the reader's position as a witness. *The Dew Breaker* includes a reference to the killing of Patrick Dorismond by a New York policeman. Unarmed Dorismond, a Haitian, was shot for apparently resisting arrest, although bystanders suggested that the policeman did not identify himself as an officer. Readers do not 'witness' the shooting of Dorismond; instead, they 'hear' of radio reports on the murder and subsequent protests from the perspective of a newly arrived Haitian migrant who does not

understand the significance of the event. This partial and indirect witnessing with its incomplete information encourages the uninformed reader to investigate the allusion. Moreover, the reference to Dorismond prompts the reader to consider how this arbitrary killing by an agent of the state shows Haitian violence echoed through the racism of the United States. Danticat also problematises the location of witnessing through her depiction of Beatrice's enigmatic story of torture and persecution, reluctantly related to journalist Aline. Aline, like the reader, can never know Beatrice's agony, which Aline sees as filling the 'blank spaces' in her life (Danticat 2004: 137).<sup>14</sup> It is also significant that Danticat incorporates into her novel foreign witnesses to atrocities in Haiti, such as the Human Rights people and the *Le Monde* journalist, who document the Dew Breaker's violence. These Western observers might be read as a metonym for Danticat's imagined audience: the former are cloistered in comfortable hotels, remote from violent events, and while their perspectives may be partial or limited, they are nevertheless ethically engaged in processes of investigating such violence. This again implies the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*: success and failure are implicit in this venture of developing a distanced perspective on violence.

### Conclusion

Danticat engages at a number of levels with the question of whether a text can look at violence perpetrated without perpetuating violence itself, considering her position as writer and the perspectives from which violence can be witnessed. Reading Žižek's notions on violence through Danticat's writing also enables a critical engagement with his ideas, showing how his notion of 'symbolic violence' might be more entwined with physical brutality than his discussion suggests. While Žižek develops his ideas and his distinctions between 'subjective' and 'objective violence' against a backdrop of Western politics, Danticat's representations of violence in the Dominican Republic and Haiti show the *visibility* of 'objective violence' and its inextricability from the seemingly more arbitrary 'subjective violence'.<sup>15</sup> Danticat's negotiation of the problem of 'laying claim to other people's suffering'

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<sup>14</sup> Another example of Danticat's limiting what the reader can witness emerges in her allusion to Emmanuel Constant, whose poster is displayed in Brooklyn. Constant was a leader of the terror squads of 'FRAPH' (the Front pour l'Avancement et le Progrès Haitien or the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti) which terrorised Aristide's supporters and was financed by the C.I.A.. At the time of the novel's composition, Constant was living as a free man, under the protection of the C.I.A., in New York. Danticat's fleeting allusions to Constant do not allow the reader to witness the violence as it happened. We have instead a character's recollection of newspaper reports about Constant's death squads; we never see Constant, only a glimpse of a man who resembles him.

<sup>15</sup> Beauvoir-Dominique, discussing the practice of 'selective repression' used in the aftermath of the Duvalier regime, between 1986 and 1993, notes: 'fresh cadavers are placed in the busiest streets every morning, preferably mutilated.... Hands and feet tied up with rope, their backs carry the trace of gunshot; at times signs of

shows a greater complexity than Mantel's assertion allows for. These conclusions can be teased out further with a final example from the first chapter of *The Dew Breaker*. As the chapter begins, the father of the narrator Ka has vanished along with her sculpted portrayal of him, a carving which was Ka's attempt to tell her father's story of imprisonment by the Duvalier regime. However, as the chapter unfolds, Ka comes to learn how her sculpture was a misrepresentation. Her father reappears without the statue, which he has destroyed. He confesses that he was not a prisoner but a jailer, torturer and murderer, the eponymous Dew Breaker. Ka's aestheticisation of her father's experience of suffering as a prisoner and her intent to commercialise this (Ka is going to sell it to a Haitian actress) are shown to be problematic on a number of levels. The actress empties the sculpture of the history Ka meant it to contain: the actress sees her own father in the image and Ka queries this appropriation of the sculpture into 'the universal world of fathers' (Danticat 2004: 12). Furthermore, Ka's attempt to speak of and for someone else's pain is shown to be misguided: the story that the destroyed sculpture was supposed to symbolise was false. Beyond this, we can read this episode metonymically, with Ka representing the writer and the Haitian actress the audience. We see that Danticat shows that while its interest is welcome, the audience may misread or even overlook suffering to fit a representation into its own experiences. We also see how she undercuts the authority of the artist to represent violence as a finished artefact: here we see the limitations of Žižek's and Mantel's claims about symbolisation. Language does not necessarily fix, and experiences are not necessarily fixed in history or memory: Danticat's writing shows symbolism can struggle and often fail but may convey meaningful fragments or silences. Investigating her novels shows that we should not simply see reading and representation as 'violence'. Nor should we see them as 'remedy'. Instead, we might conclude that Danticat's reflexive and fragmented presentations of brutality and atrocity, which challenge audiences to develop an ethical and self-critical engagement with violence, are a kind of 'pharmakon'. As 'pharmakon' her texts eschew the violence of closure and suggest the need for continual critical and open engagement with the symbolisation of violence.

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## Georges Bataille's 'Ethics of Violence'<sup>1</sup>

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An understanding of Georges Bataille's 'ethics of violence' requires that violence be read in the general context of his theory of the *heterogeneous*,<sup>2</sup> as well as from an *amoral* perspective. This element of amorality, which I will shortly discuss briefly, is tightly connected to the *heterogeneous*, which is what is denied and rejected on the very ground of what has generally been considered moral. Bataille therefore calls for a return to what has so far been excluded and rejected as dangerous, monstrous, destructive, sick, mad and perverse on these grounds. The expression of violence is just one of the manifestations of the *heterogeneous* which is met with most resistance in this project of revaluation, because of its complex web of psychological, ethical and political implications. At this early stage, a clarification is of the essence: the term 'ethics' is to be distinguished from 'morality'.<sup>3</sup> For this distinction, I am drawing on the analysis of the two terms by Bernard Williams, who himself draws on the Socratic question, 'how should one live?', contrasting it with questions such as 'what is our duty?' or 'how may we be good?'. Williams explains that Socrates' question may be interpreted as one about 'a good life' or 'a life worth living' but that it does not in itself 'bring in any distinctive moral claims' (Williams 1993: 5). He therefore argues that 'morality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in modern Western culture. [Morality] emphasizes *certain* ethical notions rather than others, developing in particular a special notion of obligation [...] In view of these features it is also, I believe, something we should treat with a special skepticism' (6; emphasis added).

It is precisely this notion of morality as a 'special system [which] demands a sharp boundary for itself (in demanding "moral" and "nonmoral" senses for words, for instance)' (7) that Bataille aims to transgress (and not reject). In this sense, Bataille's project challenges

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented as a paper at *Pharmakon: Literature and Violence*, a postgraduate conference organised by the School of English at the University of Kent and held on 20th May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bataille does not italicise the key concepts he analyses, e.g. 'heterogeneous', 'heterogeneity', 'heterology', 'homogeneous', 'homogeneity' and 'hypermorality', unless he treats them as terms to be defined. The terms are italicised throughout this article, so that it is clear that they are used as Bataillean concepts. However, it should be noted that not all italicised words in this article are necessarily Bataillean concepts.

<sup>3</sup> In 'Not Choosing between Morality and Ethics', Robert Piercey argues that even if Hegel's distinction between *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) and *Moralität* (morality) does not 'map exactly onto the contemporary distinction between ethics and morality', it is Hegel who 'paves the way for such a distinction' (Piercey 2001: 54).



conceptions of morality which have excluded the *heterogeneous* but remain within the realm of the 'ethical' which consists of this very act of transgressing 'morality'. The alternative (transgressed) morality, which has already acknowledged and opened up to the *heterogeneous*, Bataille calls '*hypermorality*' and will reappear in the last part of this article. Before that, I will first demonstrate the relationship between *violence* and the *heterogeneous* by contextualising it in Bataille's *science of heterology* and his wider discussion of suffering and anguish. This discussion will revolve around the events and the ideas that played a significant part in Bataille's fascination with violence, his understanding of anguish and war, and Bataille's reaction to the reception of his thought about violence especially in the context of and in relation to Nazi violence.

### 1. The Science of Heterology

Those who aim at an experience of human entirety and freedom need, according to Bataille, to acknowledge and embrace the *heterogeneous*, that is, the ἕτερον [*the other*] element in existence, a term which should already suggest a moving away from what is or can be made our own and familiar and which is eventually identified as one with us, the ὁμο [*the same*]. 'The very term *heterogeneous*,' Bataille writes in 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', 'indicates that it concerns elements which are impossible to assimilate' (Bataille 1979: 67). On the one hand therefore, *homogeneity* is associated with assimilable entities and qualities, elimination of differences and individuality, conformity, reason, accumulation of power, energy and wealth, as well as a hypocritical rejection of those aspects of life which put the individual in any kind of risk or instability, be these physical or psychological. *Heterogeneity*, on the other hand, clearly stands in total opposition to all this. The realm of the *heterogeneous* contains what is conventionally classified as base, filthy and dangerous and is therefore associated with the world of the wastes, bodily and mental: excrement, sweat, menstrual blood, sperm, vomit, deviant sexual acts, 'the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses' (69), madness, cannibalism, sacrifices, squandering, crime, violence etc. In short, the term *heterogeneous* encompasses all social phenomena characterised by '*violence, excess, delirium, madness*' (70; emphasis in the original). Acknowledgement of the *heterogeneous* therefore implies not only tolerating but also perceiving it and living it as necessary. Only then is the commonly valued aspect of life (beautiful, good, pure etc.) justified: 'I love purity to the point of loving impurity; without it purity would be a fraud' (Bataille 2008: 42).

To the study of these heterogeneous elements, Bataille gives the name of *science*. This is a word choice which could be interpreted as ironic, yet it is successful in denoting the

seriousness and respect, one could even say piety, with which Bataille approaches the *heterogeneous: the science of heterology*. Among the other words which Bataille was considering when making his choice, as Michel Surya (2002: 138) and Dennis Hollier (1989: 131) explain, were the words *scatology* and *agiology*, Greek words for the study or science of *excrement* and *saintliness*, for their repulsive and sacred character respectively.

It is important to distinguish, however, the *science of heterology* from the *heterogeneous*. While the *heterogeneous* is inassimilable and unrepresentable, *heterology* is a product of rationality, set in motion by the rational intention to acknowledge the inassimilability of the *heterogeneous*. This intention, however, risks either being hypocritical about its actual bonds with the *heterogeneous* or appropriating it by making false claims about it. Such an appropriation implies a fake, even if unintentional, bridging of the gap between the *heterogeneous* and the *homogeneous*, in other words, between the inassimilable, unrepresentable and discourse-less, on the one hand, and discourse and representation, on the other. Despite this, it needs to be acknowledged that *the science of heterology* marks the space within rationality where the supremacy of reason – and by extension the multifaceted expression of *homogeneity* – is put into question, or according to Botting and Wilson, that it marks ‘the uncertain space within rationality where heterogeneity declares its necessity...’ (1993: 197; ellipsis in the original). It is the response of reason to this declaration that Bataille concentrates on when he explains that ‘the intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element’ (Bataille 1997: 153). On the one hand, Bataille is careful to maintain and respect the distance between the *heterogeneous* and *heterology*, even if on the other, he proposes an experience of getting as close as possible to the former. Bataille is interested in experiencing the horrors that are involved in this movement towards the *heterogeneous*, which he describes as *inner experience*. ‘By *inner experience*’, Bataille writes, ‘I understand that which one usually calls *mystical experience*: the states of ecstasy, or rapture, at least of meditated emotion’ (Bataille 1988b: 3; italics in the original). Inner experience is therefore a state, in which everything (including oneself, or rather mainly oneself) is challenged; in short, inner experience ‘is, in fever and anguish, the putting into question (to the test) of that which a man knows of being’ (4). In inner experience one’s rational faculties are not absent, yet one tries to maintain them in a dormant state; it is generated by reason with the intention of challenging itself and the claims that are made on its behalf: ‘it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense)’ (3). It is in the

wider context of inner experience that Bataille proposes an internalisation of the experience of violence or the experience of the war, a dying without dying and of going *as deep as possible* into the darkest horrors yet returning intact. It is essential, therefore, to remember, that along with the experience of ecstasy, *inner experience* entails the experience of the horrible, of *suffering* and of *anguish*.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Life: an Open Wound: *doleo ergo sum* (I suffer therefore I am)

Bataille begins *Inner Experience*, and with this his *Summa Atheologica*,<sup>5</sup> by establishing man's 'desire to be everything' (Bataille 1988b: xxxii), the desire to achieve human entirety, part of which implies a relation of knowledge between the knowing subject and the totality of everything which is to be known, only for this desire to be frustrated and registered as an impossibility due to the limits human beings come with. In all three books of the *Summa* therefore, Bataille establishes the existence of a wound, which is primarily based on the lack of reconciliation between our incompleteness and the recognition of the impossibility of completeness, a painful gap which in the absence of God (Bataille 1988a: 14) is made deeper. In other words, he establishes for man an existential suffering, which in one's effort to ignore or avoid, the alternative is 'inner hypocrisy' (Bataille 1988b: xxxii). In the same way, *Guilty* and *On Nietzsche* set out with this suffering being taken for granted, and develop as manifestations of the author's relating to this suffering, as a proof of living to the height of it:

If my suffering were eliminated [...] human life would peter out. And as life vanished, so too would our far-off, inevitable truth, the truth that incompleteness, death, and the unquenchable desire are, in a sense, being's never-to-be-healed wound, without which inertia (while death absorbs us into itself and there's no more change) would imprison us. (Bataille 1988b: 24)

This wound which is crucial in Bataille's thought is never to be healed because 'without your pain, you're nothing!' (Bataille 1988a: 69). An open wound becomes therefore the condition of a *human* and sovereign<sup>6</sup> life and the experience of pain is by no means a symptom of weakness. Those in pain should not feel pity for themselves, for what they should seek is strength: 'I don't avoid either pain or wounds. Wounded in my eyes or gut? What I want all

<sup>4</sup> One may already perceive the Heideggerian reverberations in the concept of *anguish* (*Angst*), as well as in the concept of *project* and the idea of death being relevant to the way we live rather than the way we die (*being-toward-death*), which appear later in this paper. However, such a comparative reading merits a much more extensive analysis and will not be attempted here.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Atheologica* (*La Somme athéologique*) is a trilogy consisting of *Inner Experience* (1943), *Guilty* (1944) and *On Nietzsche* (1945). The title of the trilogy is a meaningful distortion of Thomas Aquinas' 13th century unfinished theological treatise *Summa Theologica*.

<sup>6</sup> 'Sovereignty can only exist on the condition that it should never assume power, which is action, the primacy of the future over the present moment' (Bataille 1973: 134).

the same is strength, not sickness—unwavering strength. [...] Strength comes from knowing the secret, and the secret's revealed in anguish' (57).

I claim that an understanding of Bataille's 'ethics of violence', implies an understanding of the concept of *anguish*, which is both the generator and the result of the suffering. Anguish does not have an end and does not lead anywhere other than anguish: If the will to anguish can only *ask* questions, the answer, if it comes, wills that anguish be maintained. The answer is, 'anguish is your fate' (75). It is pain that maintains the wound open and, quite predictably, experiences of shock and suffering are of particular interest for Bataille.

### 3. Violent Stimuli

It was at around the age of twenty, that Bataille started to become aware of the emergence of a deep fascination with violence. It can be thought that this fascination, which was both of an emotional and intellectual nature, had been triggered by a number of incidents Bataille experienced at that time as well as by other people's ideas with which he had become familiar.

The first one, chronologically, is the tragic death of the Spanish matador Manolo Granero, in Madrid in 1922. Despite the fact that he was not close enough to the ring to see the actual accident, in which Granero's head was pierced through the right eye, this death, horrified and fascinated Bataille. This is critical to our understanding of Bataille's later perception of violence and horror; after describing how 'theatrical entrance' of Granero's death at the festival's height had an 'evident, expected and intolerable quality', he continues: 'From that day on I never went to a bullfight without a sense of anguish straining my nerves intensely. This anguish not in the least diminished my desire to go to the bullring'. The crucial point is his next observation: 'On the contrary, it exacerbated it, taking shape with a feverish impatience. I *then began to understand* that unease is often the secret of the greatest pleasures' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 43–44; emphasis in the original). The emphasis by Bataille in this last sentence is important in showing how his fascination with as well as horror of extreme violence is of both an affective and an intellectual nature, and how, eventually, Bataille would become attracted by experiences which could grant this kind of unease, connecting one back to the existential wound. In other words, Bataille focuses on the *product* of the experience of violence and not on the violent act *per se*, which for Bataille has to be stripped of any moral judgments.

This experience was followed by Bataille's introduction to photographs of the *Ling Chi* Chinese torture.<sup>7</sup> These showed several stages of an act of torture which entailed cutting one hundred pieces from the victim's body.<sup>8</sup> Besides the obvious horror that these photos aroused, Bataille was especially intrigued by the quasi-ecstatic expression on the victim's face. The unique quality that Bataille finds in this specific example of torture, which is not found in other, religiously justified torture for example, depends on the fact that in the Chinese torture there is no meaning, no redemption and no salvation implied. It is a simple squandering of life. Then and only then, does horror acquire its sacred quality, when torture and horror are experienced meaninglessly and purposelessly; when, in other words, pain is wasted. Bataille writes: 'This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable' (Bataille 1989: 206; question mark in the original).

Moreover, Bataille's fascination with death and violence was enhanced by his research on the human sacrifices practiced by the Aztec, a lifestyle disturbed by violence, horror and death that was to become for Bataille the model of a healthy and sovereign society. Related to the idea of sacrifice is Bataille's concept of 'general economy' which is based on the notion of 'expenditure', which implies Bataille's convictions that 'a society always produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal' (Bataille 1988c: 106) and that people should also indulge in expenditure, squandering and prodigality with the same passion with which they work, produce and accumulate. This is an idea that Bataille extends from Marcel Mauss' research and analysis of the Native American tribes' customs of gift giving and of 'potlatch', the tribal chiefs' competing in the destruction of considerable amounts of wealth. Suspicious of Western values and trust in moderation, hard work and measures to secure the future, Bataille, therefore, dismisses work as 'the foundation for knowledge and reason, [...] which humanized the animal we once were' (Bataille 1989: 41). Bataille draws from Mauss' discoveries but extends the notion of expenditure from its economic and material context to the more general framework of his philosophy so that it encompass activities such as one's own putting into risk, maintaining one's wound open and exposing oneself to shocks, depression, crises, wars and horrors. At the same time, Bataille is aware of the fact that expenditure, of any type, is met with great resistance, and claims that 'between

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<sup>7</sup> Transliteration of the Chinese name of the torture, which can be translated as *slow slicing*, *slow process*, *lingering death* or *death by a thousand cuts*. It literally means *cutting into pieces*.

<sup>8</sup> These photographs were taken by Georges Dumas in 1905 and seen by Bataille via Adrien Borel, his analyst, in 1925.

the horrors of war and the renunciation of one of the activities by which a society believes it must assure its future, society chooses war' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 385), a cursed choice, humanity's 'accursed share'.

#### 4. War: From an Amoral Perspective

Predictably enough, Bataille embraces unreservedly what can provide the individual with anguish, suffering and pain: 'Change and disturbance help give thought the ability to wound, while peaceful times hardly do this. To conquer truth's equivocations, you have to have times that turn people and things upside down, instead of letting them stagnate' (Bataille 1988a: 59). Bataille acknowledges that man's tendency, and sign of weakness, is to remain in a state of stagnation rather than accepting the violent play of change. This weakness is due to the fact that man is unavoidably plunged in time, history and the realm of project. For Bataille it is imperative that man take a distance, an *amoral* distance, from the realm of project which will enable him to see things in their necessary, *ahistoric* and *amoral* universality. Distancing himself from the realm of project and history implies that man realises that death 'is the only serious denial of illusion, for if I die, the world is in no longer reducible to my spirit which reflects it. [...] For I count for nothing; it is the world only which matters' (Bataille 1986b: 65–66).

Bataille does take this distant view; as Surya observes: '[He] abstained from pronouncing himself *morally* on any particular fact (the events of 1934, the rise of fascism, for example), from judging as a moralist; which is to say judging [...] from the perspective of what had to be and what must be' (Surya 2002: 428). Such a distance and abstention of course can be challenged for their ethical implications. How can one experience war *ahistorically* while war is taking place? How legitimate is it for Bataille, who otherwise says that he would indeed be willing to fight if the conditions demanded or permitted it,<sup>9</sup> to read *Hervie* and Proust while a battle is unfolding (Bataille 1992: 162) or to write at the bar and drink during an air raid (124)? Yet Bataille writes in the opening pages of *Guilty* that 'no one relates to the war madness, I'm the only one who can do this' (Bataille 1988a: 12). And if it is neither the combat aspect of war he finds fascinating,<sup>10</sup> nor the political aspect of it,<sup>11</sup> then what is it? What kind of relation with the war does Bataille claim to have?

<sup>9</sup> 'I'm not unaffected by the war. I'd be glad to give my blood, weariness, and what's more, the brutal moments undergone at death's approach' (Bataille 1988a: 12).

<sup>10</sup> 'I despise the boorishness of people drawn to the combat aspect of war' (Ibid: 56).

<sup>11</sup> '[T]he political is what justifies war, its results are political ... But not war *itself*' (Surya 2002: 285; ellipsis and emphasis in the original).



From September to June, to the extent that war was going on, my awareness of it consisted of anguish. I saw in the war something ordinary life lacked – something that caused fear and prompts horror and anguish. I turned to it to lose my thinking in horror – for me, war was torment, falling off a rooftop, a volcano erupting. [...] it attracted me by provoking anguish. (Bataille 1988a: 56)

By ‘war madness’ then, Bataille does not mean the practicalities of war. Rather, he implies an internalisation of the war experience: ‘Sitting on the edge of the bed, facing a window and the night, I practiced, determined to become a war zone myself’ (15). Internalised thus, the war experience has nothing to do with the actual killing *out there* and becomes useful for *inner experience*. Bataille says so explicitly: ‘I won’t speak of war, but of mystical experience. [...] [H]ow even for a moment can I dismiss this non-knowledge, a feeling of having lost my way in some underground tunnel?’ (12)

It is important to clarify that even if Bataille is fascinated by war, he nevertheless does not call for a revolution of absolute violence. He does not suggest that everybody be killed and annihilated, or that a constant state of massacre be established. ‘It is not that evil would be the contrary of justice’ (Bataille in Surya 2002: 430). This would imply the dissolution of limits, and transgression. an important concept for Bataille, would no longer be possible. Let us remember that Bataille does not call for an eradication of morality but for its transgression. However, even if it is only the acknowledgement of death to which Bataille wants people to commit through violence, horror or the death of the other, he does not exclude real death from being there, available always as a possibility, as a threat, keeping the wound of anguish open. ‘For the individual, partial loss is a means of dying while surviving. It’s foolish to try to avoid the horror of loss. [...] You have to come *as close as possible* to death. Without flinching. And even, if necessary, flinching. ...and even, if necessary, dying’ (Bataille 1988a: 93; ellipsis and emphasis in the original).

What grants the individual the experience of anguish is the acknowledgement that real death always exists as a possibility, a possibility that in the Bataillean system is revalued and repositioned as a process within life and not simply as the end of life: ‘But I like death: the idea of death, which I don’t see as a failure’ (Bataille in Surya 2002: 492). Death is not a passage from life to something other but that human possibility which alone defines what the *human* is. Death should become part of life, not as something castrated, familiar and predictable (like it is in the concentration camps or in the case of suicide), but as the tragic and horrible instant that it is. But the real event of death is apparently the only thing that can alleviate suffering and heal the wound: ‘Someday my tragedy will know completion and I’ll die. Only that day, because I’ve anticipated it and put myself in its light, gives meaning to



what I am. I haven't any other hope' (Bataille 1988a: 15). At the moment of death, existence is justified and the wound is healed.

## 5. Bataille and Fascism

It may have already become apparent how Bataille's position with regard to violence, which is both overt and unskillfully self-defensive, and his fascination with war paved the way for a number of accusations and reproaches concerning what has been considered an ambiguous stance in relation to fascism. Despite the likely validity of these reproaches and the seriousness of the historico-political context, my aim is to remain within Bataille's perspective and look at how he responded to these reproaches rather than providing an accurate account of them.<sup>12</sup>

In pre-war France, when popular opinion was placing its hopes on communism and was investing in the possibility of left-inspired revolution, Bataille was among the very few who were extremely critical of communism, and fascism could have been interpreted favourably for the promise it was coming with for a complete *Aufklärung* (enlightenment, be this social, economic or political). Surya observes that:

Bataille was not a man of the left, [...]: he had hardly any belief – if at all – in mankind. He did not believe in progress [...]: he therefore did not believe in history'. Revolution for him 'would resemble a catastrophe more than a peace, an irrationality rather than a rationality, a liberation of the instincts than their equitable ordering. (2002: 225)

Not at all unintentionally, Bataille had his name associated with acts and statements such as the one which appears in one of the last pamphlets of *Contre-Attaque* in March 1936.<sup>13</sup> The specific pamphlet was titled *Sous le feu des canons française ... et alliés* (Under fire from the French ... and allies' canons), written by Jean Dautry and signed by Bataille among others. The pamphlet read: 'We are against the scraps of paper and the slave prose of chancellors' offices ... To them we prefer in every case and without being duped the antidiplomatic brutality of Hitler, less surely mortal for peace than the dribbling provocation of diplomats and politicians (in Surya 2002: 225; ellipsis in the original). In a defensive attitude towards Dautry, drawing from his active participation in left and communist movements, Surya minimises the politically frightening implications of this tract but cannot hide his disappointment with this fact which he describes 'imprudent', and implies that Bataille should know better when it comes to the not always clear relationship between ideas, words and actions:

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of Bataille's place in fascist politics see Richard Wolin's 'Left Fascism: Georges Bataille and the German Ideology', *Constellations*, Vol.2, Issue 3, pp. 397–428, 26 Oct 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Contre-Attaque* was a politically inspired movement Bataille co-founded with André Breton in 1935.

This is extraordinary, for Bataille was a long way from being able to subscribe to such a declaration himself. He wrote nothing which authorises us to suspect or allows us to think that his hatred of clerical bourgeois parliamentarianism was such that he preferred the unbridled brutality of National Socialism. Nothing at all, and yet ... (Surya 2002: 225; ellipsis in the original)

And yet, Bataille refused to take seriously the implications of such actions.

Because of these ‘surfascist’ tendencies, the group of *Contre-Attaque* soon called for its own dissolution, which Bataille recalls in his *Autobiographical Note*:

Counterattack was dissolved at the end of the winter. (The supposed pro-fascist tendency on the part of certain of Bataille’s friends, and, to a lesser degree, of Bataille himself. For an understanding of the element of truth in this paradoxical fascist tendency, despite its radically contrary intention, one should read Elio Vittorini’s *The Red Carnation*, together with its strange postface. There is no doubt that the bourgeois world as it exists constitutes a provocation to violence and that, in that world, the exterior forms of violence hold a fascination. Be that as it may, Bataille considers, at least since Counterattack, that this fascination can lead to the worst.) (Bataille 1986a: 109)

In this text, written circa 1958, Bataille repeatedly stresses the inaccuracy of such accusations but without justifying any further such a protest. This is seen particularly in the phrases: ‘supposed pro-fascist tendency’, ‘paradoxical fascist tendency’, ‘radically contrary intention’, as well as in the reference to Vittorini’s work; *The Red Carnation* was written in 1933-35, published in 1948, and is known for its anti-fascist affiliations. Despite this protest, Bataille retains his polemical attitude towards the bourgeois hypocrisy of complete denial of violence. However, he has spoken of Auschwitz as ‘the decisive, undisputed and irreducible sign of evil’ (Bataille in Surya 2002: 429), and 1958 was most probably the first time that he admitted that fascination with violence ‘can lead to the worst’. Yet, even if for Bataille the specific war ‘had not had the effect he hoped: one of clarification’<sup>14</sup> (Surya 2002: 364), his fascination with war did not fade away.

In an attempt to defend Bataille, Michel Surya and Dennis Hollier, among others, try to provide clues for a distinction between Bataille’s project and Nazi ideology, especially when it comes to their approach to violence and death. Bataille treated death as the meaningless and purposeless event of annihilation that it is, while fascism glorified death, bestowing on it power and immunity. Moreover, violence for Bataille was sovereign and emancipating, in the sense that it was transgressing taboos, while fascist violence was legalised by becoming utilitarian and nationally useful. The motivations therefore behind the Nazi violence were accumulation of power and extermination of the heterogeneous other, which were completely incompatible with the Bataillean principles. Fascism could not include in its project of

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<sup>14</sup> By ‘clarification’, Surya here means *Aufklärung* (enlightenment).

cleansing and purity the ignoble and the filthy and the excluded that Bataille defended and considered as elements and manifestations of the heterogeneous.

Despite or rather because of the monstrosities of Nazism which Bataille had acknowledged,<sup>15</sup> he had not been willing to dismiss Nazi violence as *humanly* impossible. Bataille was provokingly stressing, as *amorally* as possible, that Auschwitz was absolutely *humanly* possible. Auschwitz therefore became a manifestation of humanity not in its specificity but in its universality: 'Like you and I, those responsible for Auschwitz had a human nose, mouth, voice and reason, they were able to make love, have children; like the pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact and sign of mankind. Man's image is henceforth inseparable from a gas chamber' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 359). Bataille does not separate people between the executed and the executioners but, rather, tries to locate what in their being makes the execution possible, something that is a characteristic of not only the executioners but the victims as well. Such an acknowledgement may not take anything away from its horror but is essential for saving humanity from repeating the same catastrophes, precisely because by being aware of such a possibility, humanity will be able to anticipate and prevent it from happening. This is what Richardson and Surya seem to imply when they say respectively: 'Bataille's whole thinking assumes that the enormity of what happened in the concentration camps was not an aberration of mankind, rather it showed the danger we run if we engage in a collective repression of our fundamental inner violence' (Richardson 1994: 132) and 'to wish to ignore [the possibility of violence] would be to expose oneself to [its] sudden re-emergence in one form or another' (Surya 2002: 360).

The distinction that needs to be made here, therefore, is between justification and explanation. Bataille does not justify the Nazi monstrosities but he dares to explain them, and this, for him, should be enough for there to be no misunderstandings as to his position *vis à vis* them. We, however, may still find this explanation disturbing and be unwilling to go along and say with him, as he does when defending Nietzsche, that 'it's frightening to see thought reduced to the propaganda level' (Bataille 1992: xxii). Surya accurately suggests that Bataille should have been more careful with the implications and responsibility of theory in a reality which is in a state of socio-political vulnerability, confusion and turmoil. But do we not misread Bataille if we read as evil these states which have to be avoided at all costs? Is this

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<sup>15</sup> 'There is generally an oppressive and sickening element in the fact of being a man which it is necessary to overcome. But this weight and this repugnance have never been so oppressive as after Auschwitz' (Bataille in Surya 2002: 359).

not the very same thought he wants us to escape from in order to be able to redefine ourselves in relation to the *heterogeneous*?

### Conclusion

I have so far analysed violence as one manifestation or expression of the *heterogeneous*. However, at this stage, I would like to argue that violence is not *only* one of the manifestations of the *heterogeneous* but that it lends itself to the *heterogeneous* completely. The *heterogeneous* is imbued in violence; it is violent. In 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' Bataille writes that '[h]eterogeneous reality is that of a force or shock' (Bataille 1979: 70). The expression of the *heterogeneous* always hides in it an attack, especially in the forceful and violent way it confronts the *homogeneous*, servile, assimilative and commensurable reality. But most importantly, the *heterogeneous* is violent for what it is and what it carries within it evil. Despite the fact that violence and evil are two different concepts, they are in this context related in the sense that violence is presented as an expression of evil: '[T]he summit isn't a *submission* to but a *willing* of evil. It is a voluntary pact with sin, crime, and evil. A pact made with a relentless fate that requires that while some live, others die' (Bataille 1992: 26; emphasis in the original).

What Bataille seems to be doing, therefore, is trying to provide an alternative evaluative judgement for evil, an alternative which claims not to be a judgement and which draws from Bataille's respect for the disturbing work of chance, which necessarily negates any possibility of a morally oriented judgement. Bataille clarifies that 'evil is the opposite of a constraint that on principle is practiced with a view toward good. Of course evil isn't what a hypocritical series of misunderstandings makes it out to be: isn't it essentially a concrete *freedom*, the uneasy breaking of a taboo' (Bataille 1992: xxv)? And with this, he reminds us of his intention to distance himself and his project from morality *as it is*. Yet, he claims that the concept of evil does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality' (Bataille 1973: preface); it demands that morality be transgressed. *Hypermorality*, therefore, needs to be read in the light of 'hold[ing] nothing back' and which favours 'the superabundance of forces, prodigality, ruin, luxury, perversity, sexual release, vice and crime, tearing apart and ecstasy, extreme anguish and death' (Surya 2002: 425).

The problem which arises, however, is that if we accept that the whole realm of *heterogeneity* is primarily violent, then by renouncing the component of violence for its potential ethical risks, the whole edifice of *heterogeneity* collapses too. Despite the frightening implications of *hypermorality*, such a renunciation for Bataille would not be

legitimate. In my opinion, the ethical and political ambiguity to which Bataille's thought may give rise is consciously left unresolved by Bataille, who never felt the need to provide any serious response to politically oriented accusations. For this reason there has never been any clearly articulated self-defence, unlike the monumental defence he made on behalf of Nietzsche.

Any effort to understand Bataille's 'ethics of violence', I claim, is bound to end in frustration, for doing so implies breathing the 'irrespirable air' of Bataille's summit where evil (being open to the amoral working of chance) is good and good (a hypocritical repression and rejection of the *heterogeneous*) is evil, in other words, where morality gives way to *hypermorality*. For Bataille it was obvious, and it should be obvious to all, that his project, even if scary, was not legitimating or endorsing the Nazi brutalities: 'no one, of course, is going to claim that I wish to start new cycles of holocaust' (Bataille 1986b: 61). Because of the lack of a loud and clearly articulated protest against the Nazi brutalities however, Bataille's political or ethical stance was not at all obvious. It remains, lastly, to consider how pharmaceutical Bataille's 'ethics of violence' is and to decide whether the therapeutic and poisonous dosages are correct.

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## Violence, Resistance and the Birth of a New Literature

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When Thomas Babington Macaulay, then serving on the Supreme Council of India, presented his 'Minute on Indian Education' to Lord Bentinck on the 2nd of February 1835, arguing for the adoption of the English language as the teaching medium in Indian institutions from the sixth form onwards, he envisaged the birth of a new class of English-educated native, 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay 1835). The Indian native of this new class, enlightened, civilised, made less threatening and more recognisable by a reduction of his otherness,<sup>1</sup> curbed through the English language, was envisaged as 'a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1991:86); these 'mimic men'<sup>2</sup> would help to lead the rest of the native population by their example and through their superiority. To achieve this, Macaulay's 'aggressive' project methodically sought to discourage the teaching of both *bhasha* or indigenous Indian languages, such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and classical languages, such as Sanskrit and Persian, in all Indian institutions of further education and, instead, emphasised the moral imperative of the English language and literature.<sup>3</sup>

Bengal was an important territory where the immediate results of this new system of education could be measured, for it was then both the administrative and commercial capital of India; consequently, constant interaction between the white rulers and the thousands of people they governed was inevitable. The effects of this system became conspicuous in two main ways in Bengal: there emerged, on the one hand, those anglicised and pro-British *babus* who saw in their newly acquired English education the opportunity to ingratiate themselves even further with their colonial rulers and, on the other, a group of Bengalis of a certain type

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003) discusses how Victorians, at one and the same time, both feared and were fascinated by the 'otherness' of natives, i.e. their radical difference from Victorian norms; imposing their language on natives was one of their attempts to reduce this dangerous and disturbing 'otherness.'

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this term from Bhabha (1994: 88).

<sup>3</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan uses the term 'aggressive' in relation to the Anglicist projects, such as Macaulay's, which imposed unbending Anglocentric views on the native population (Sunder Rajan 1986: 25). In support of his claim for the superiority of the English language Macaulay said:

The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West.[...] It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together. (Macaulay 1835)



who began to wield the English language as a weapon in their stand against injustice of colonisation, a group whose aim was to counter colonial tyranny with the literature they produced in the colonisers' own language. This was the group who, in the words of Sunder Rajan, 'turned the knowledge of English culture forced upon them into an effective tool for argument, resistance and subversion (Sunder Rajan 1986: 33); the group of Bhabha's 'mimic men', who subverted the very original they were mimicking.<sup>4</sup> And it is with the passive revolt initiated by this latter category of resisting and subtly coercive literates that my article is concerned. After comparing the various modes of resistance which flourished in the awakening of Indian patriotism, this article will show how nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian writers not only fully participated in national discourse but also used the medium of a language that had been imposed upon them by Macaulay to express disapproval of colonialism and stimulate nationalistic feelings peacefully.

Prompted by the avant-garde thinker and social activist Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), the Bengali *bhadralok* had already started a regional reform within the state a few years earlier.<sup>5</sup> This reform is often referred to as the Bengal Renaissance. The Renaissance had witnessed an intellectual awakening that had revolutionised many aspects of Bengali lifestyle and culture, as well as approaches to philosophy, literature, science and politics. Orthodox attitudes prevalent in all these fields had been challenged and altered. The spirit of change and revolt had become nascent within the state. It is also during the Renaissance that awareness of the injustice of colonial subjugation became more pronounced and widespread, for various leaders emerged around this time to organise a collective resistance against colonisation. Their approaches were, however, quite distinct from each other: if, on the one hand, the Renaissance saw the emergence of Swami Vivekananda, who, albeit with a debatable degree of success, strived to rid Hinduism of its rigid orthodoxy and raise inter-faith awareness so as to promote harmony and unity within the different communities in the country (and thus collectively combat the outsider, that is, the coloniser), it also witnessed the rise of violent freedom-seekers like Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–c.1945). Bose's aphorism

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<sup>4</sup> Bhabha explains this process as follows:

Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. (Bhabha 1994: 91)

<sup>5</sup> The *bhadralok* is that class which emerged when the urbane, educated and cultured Bengali gentry encountered and absorbed British learning and culture. These were mainly aristocratic and upper-caste Hindus, since 'culture and education [...] were rarely unrelated to social and economic power' in Bengal. (Bhattacharya 2005: 30).

‘*tum mujhe khoon do, main tumhe aazadi doonga* [Give me blood and I will give you freedom]’ aptly summarised his violent ideology, which set him against *ahimsa-vaadi* [propagators of the path of non-violence] freedom-fighters like Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948). Though Gandhi did indeed succeed in gathering more supporters and emerged as the key resistance figure at national level, Bose’s influence was not negligible, as Cohen and Sivanandan discuss: Bose formed and led the Indian National Army, which fought against the British in Southeast Asia during the Second World War and whose commanders included many defectors from the Indian Army (Cohen 1963: 411 and Sivanandan 2004: 54).

Against this background of greater religious tolerance and violent opposition to colonisation emerged a group of intellectuals who were also influential in shaping Renaissance thinking, including Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950). These two were among the earliest writers to articulate *in English* the longing for freedom from colonial suppression. An illustration of this is Tagore’s 1910 poem, ‘Where the mind is without fear’ in *Gitanjali*, the English translation of which brought him global fame and recognition and eventually earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. *Gitanjali*’s poems would excite the spirit of resistance in its readers and ‘Where the mind is without fear,’ would receive much acclaim for its far-sightedness and daring:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
*Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.* (Tagore 1962: 16; added emphasis)

The poem throughout points to Tagore’s dream of a liberated (‘Where the mind is without fear’), self-governed (‘and the head is held high’) and united (‘Where the world has not been broken up into fragments’) India. The last line (‘Into that heaven of freedom [...] let my country awake’) especially brings forth the envisaged, quasi-utopian image of his country freed from colonisation. With the likes of Tagore and Aurobindo, the English language thus acquired another function in India: English had made the empire by articulating it; it was now being used to unmake it. This spirit of resistance, teased out by the Bengali poets, was further intensified by the new breed of Indian novelists writing in English who emerged shortly afterwards; Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), whose novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* was

published in 1864, is generally accepted to be the first of these,<sup>6</sup> indeed, Mukherjee asserts that *Rajmohan's Wife* 'is probably not just the first English novel in India but in all of Asia' (Mukherjee 2002: 157).

It may seem surprising that it took so long for the first Indian novel in English to appear, given that between 1835, when Macaulay wrote his *Minute*, and 1864, when *Rajmohan's Wife* was serialised, enough time had elapsed for English to have spread and established itself among the natives across India. Indian intellectuals were also still being subjected continuously to literature in English (Mukherjee 2000: 4).<sup>7</sup> Between these two dates, however, the initial plans regarding the role that English was expected to play in the Indian administration had been disrupted by a violent event. This disruption took the form of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which led to the dissolution of the East India Company in that same year.<sup>8</sup> Though the violence of the Mutiny was eventually brought under control, with the British gaining ground within a year of the onset of the rebellion, and though this was also the year in which Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India, there is no denying that the events of 1857 triggered large-scale anti-British feelings which had not been as rife before. Bernard Cohn even asserts that '[t]he end of the empire was marked where it might be said to have begun, in 1857 [...]' (Cohn 1983: 209).

The Christian missionary undertaking had been at its zenith after Macaulay's successful *Minute*. The missionaries, many of whom at the same time also taught in Indian educational institutions, had tried to promote a view of English literature, which they selectively made available to those learning English in India, as being imbued with the spirit of Christianity and interwoven with the words of the Bible; virtues which they marketed to the natives as being fundamental for their moral elevation and success. They had even had considerable success in propagating this idea before the Mutiny. The Christian convert and English-educated, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1825–1873), who wrote poems such as 'The Captive Ladie' and 'Visions of the Past,' in what he thought of as the style of Wordsworth and other British Romantic poets, was one such native with whom they were successful. The English language and education, Dutt convinced himself, had raised him to a position superior to that of other

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<sup>6</sup> First published in serial form, it did not appear its entirety until 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Mukherjee points out that the number of reviews in India-based literary journals of the mid-nineteenth century attests to the great influx of books from England, including a 'sizeable percentage of contemporary novels of the popular variety.' These 'eventually found their way to the homes of the English-educated Indians who were otherwise encouraged in their curriculum to read only canonical texts.'

<sup>8</sup> The Sepoy Mutiny is variously known as the Indian Rebellion of 1857, India's First War of Independence, the Great Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny, the Revolt of 1857, the Uprising of 1857 and the Sepoy Rebellion.

Indians, and contact with England would elevate him to the status of the great poet he was, at least in his estimation. Mukherjee quotes him in a letter to his friend Gaurdas Basak:

I am reading Tom Moore's life of my favourite Byron—splendid book upon my word! Oh! How I should like to see you writing my life, if I happen to be a great poet—which I am almost sure I shall be if I go to England (Mukherjee 2000:45).

Gauri Viswanathan points out how, like Dutt, several native students of the new system established by Macaulay had begun to look upon English literary instruction as 'an instrument of authenticity' which 'places the Indian reader in a position where he renews contact with himself, recovering his true essence and identity from the degradation to which it had been subject through native despotism' (Viswanathan 1989: 141).

But the Sepoy Mutiny upset some of these plans. The idea of the ethical purport of English literature could no longer be sold to a nation which had witnessed the carnage in which their self-proclaimed moral guides had taken part and which had ended with the deaths of so many of their compatriots. Moreover, any claim for greater morality that the English might previously have advanced was weakened by controversy over the new Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle about which many natives were still outraged, since the introduction of this new rifle among the Hindu and Muslim sepoys had been seen as a 'deception' carried out by East India Company officers towards the native sepoys.<sup>9</sup> The Mutiny consequently awakened many natives to nationalist sentiments which intensified over the coming decades and would eventually lead on to the independence of the country almost a century later, in 1947. The beginnings of the Indian English novel less than a decade later coincide, therefore, with the beginnings of organised Indian nationalist movements—both of the violent and non-violent kind.

*Rajmohan's Wife*, written in a florid style reminiscent of Sanskrit *kavya* [epic],<sup>10</sup> does not overtly preach the propagation of decolonisation, but Makarand Paranjape points out how the novel can be read as 'a sort of national allegory' (Paranjape 2010), even more so, given the

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<sup>9</sup> The controversy about the rifle arose when the native sepoys heard the rumour that the part of the cartridge they had to bite open in order to load this new rifle was greased with lard and tallow, i.e. pork and beef fat to which both Muslims and Hindus objected, since contact with pork, in the case of Muslims, and beef, in the case of Hindus, was forbidden to them by their religions (Wolpert 1991:53). The discovery of this fact, therefore, outraged many who thought that they had been deceived by the officers to act against their faith.

<sup>10</sup> Descriptions such as 'Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was as full of charm as that of the land-lotus half-scorched and half-radiant under the noonday sun' (Bankim 1996: 3) and other such elaborate metaphors which abound in the writing attest to Bankim's familiarity with the form of the Sanskrit *kavya*.

subsequent contribution of Bankim in shaping the face of Indian nationalism:<sup>11</sup> Bankim's poem *Bande* (or *Vande*) *Mataram* [Hail to thee, Mother], which first featured in his 1882 Bengali novel *Anandamath*, personifies the mother-land India as a mother-figure in bondage. The poem was subsequently adopted as the national song of India and '*Bande Mataram*' became the national slogan during the struggle for freedom, a slogan which was used during both riots of protest and peaceful demonstrations of civil disobedience. Paranjape sees in *Rajmohan's Wife* the beginnings of this metaphor of the captive mother. He views Matangini, the heroine of the novel, as the epitome of the free-spirited India, increasingly aware of the discomfort of her oppression:

Matangini [...] is not just Rajmohan's wife, but the 'spirit' or personification of modern India itself. This is an emergent, hesitant, yet strong-willed and attractive India. It is not the India of villages or the old India of feudal times. This India has been born near the capital, Calcutta, and is full of new possibilities. But, this beautiful and powerfully drawn image of India is also shown as burdened by sorrow and anxiety. It is neither free nor happy, but its energies and powers are under the control of an unworthy husband. [...] The restlessness, vitality, charm, and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini. (Paranjape 2010)

Thus, though not overt, his support of the resistance to colonisation (which was becoming more and more topical at the time he was writing), is implied by Bankim in the character of Matangini.

Almost a generation later, a more purposefully stated and pointed use of English in resisting the coloniser was to be made by Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), R. K. Narayan (1906–2001) and Raja Rao (1908–2006), the first of the Indian writers to achieve their fame and recognition *purely* as writers in English. Anand, Narayan and Rao had started writing when India was still a British colony but at a time when civil disobedience had begun to touch the lives of Indians from all walks of life, not just those who were politically conscious. At about the same time as these three writers were beginning to make a name for themselves, Gandhi's Quit India Movement had also been gaining ground. One would have thought that taking up English at such a time would have implied a greater sense of affiliation with the British, but all three were, in fact, largely influenced by Gandhi and his philosophy, though Gandhi himself was no great propagandist for the dissemination of the English language in India. Unlike Roy, who assumed that languages were culturally and ideologically neutral, a view which had led him to fight for the acquisition of foreign languages in order to advance Indian society during the Bengal Renaissance, Gandhi regarded languages as 'not only

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<sup>11</sup> The assumption that literature from third world countries is necessarily 'literature of national allegory' is a hotly debated topic. Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad famously belong to the two opposing camps of this debate (Ahmad 1992).

territorial but civilisational markers' (Robertson 2003: 40). English, the product of a different civilisation, with a different set of cultural, religious, political and historical experiences, could not, for him, speak to Indians of their own existence and even less teach them anything about themselves; Gandhi thus condemned the intensely Anglocentric system of education for its de-Indianising effect and laid more emphasis on religious and ethical education instead, even deeming many of the sciences being taught to Indians to be unnecessary. Material in English books which was worthy of dissemination was instead to be taught in the *bhasha* languages:

Those English books which are valuable, we should translate into the various Indian languages. We should abandon the pretension of learning many sciences. Religious, that is ethical, education will occupy the first place. Every cultured Indian will know in addition to his own provincial language, if a Hindu, Sanskrit; if a Mahomedan, Arabic; if a Parsee, Persian; and all, Hindi. Some Hindus should know Arabic and Persian; some Mahomedans and Parsees, Sanskrit. Several Northerners and Westerners should learn Tamil. A universal language for India should be Hindi, with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagri characters. (Gandhi 2009: 103).

In Gandhi's opinion, the effect of Macaulay's education system had been to make foreigners of many of the resident Indian elite, in that they appeared to have a greater affinity with the English than with the Indians from other strata of society; hence, these elite were indifferent to colonial subjugation. To revive their sense of national pride, Gandhi, who himself came from an affluent family well-versed in the English way and had studied law at University College, London, ostentatiously rejected the symbols of imperialism which, for him, implied subservience. English education, and especially the use of English in teaching, was one of the primary symbols of colonial rule and therefore one of Gandhi's main targets.

Nonetheless, through their writing in English, Anand, Narayan and Rao professed support and fidelity to Gandhi's philosophy and ideals. This was reflected not so much in the anti-imperial content as in the adherence to the agenda of internal national reform which Gandhi advocated. Anand's major work, *Untouchable* (1935) emerged when Gandhi was actively trying to integrate *dalits* (whom Gandhi calls *harijans* [Children of God]) into the rest of the Hindu, and indeed Indian, society. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) is set during Gandhi's Quit India Movement, and Gandhi himself figures as a character in the novel. As for Rao, the figure of the 'Mahatma' (a conspicuous reference to Gandhi) pervades many of his short stories, and *Kanthapura*, arguably the most famous of his works, depicts the way in



which a small village in South India takes up Gandhi's call in the national struggle for independence.<sup>12</sup>

Though it was in English, the work of these three authors was thus a far cry from Macaulay's dream to educate the natives through English so as 'to form [...] a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'. Macaulay had envisaged an enriching of India's 'vernacular dialects [...] with terms of science borrowed from the *Western* nomenclature,' which would have rendered them 'by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population' (Macaulay 1835; added emphasis), but this plan had rebounded on him. Although Anand, Narayan and Rao had learnt their craft from Dickens, Hardy and Wodehouse, the fact that they were writing in India and in an Indian context meant that their writing was not overshadowed by the 'Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of [their] Indian past' (Anand, quoted in Gandhi, 2003: 168). Their works reflected the 'compromise between foreign form and local materials' (Moretti 2004: 154), which Moretti adduces as the marking trait of the modern novel from any culture: in terms of content and stylistic features, these texts were celebrating Indian native culture through the imported form of the novel and the English language.

Anand, Narayan and Rao were at that point already defamiliarising English for an anglophone audience by Indianising the language, through a process that Salman Rushdie would later most aptly define as *chutnification*.<sup>13</sup> The *chutnification* of the English language was their act of passive revolt against the anglicisation of their culture that had been imposed upon them as a result of Macaulay's educational system. Importing syntax, words and variants from the *bhasha* languages into English pointedly set their language against the 'standard' English imposed as the 'norm' by their colonial masters. Their literature, in which 'Caliban's voice' became more audible (though he was still speaking in the language of Prospero)<sup>14</sup> thus became their means of refuting the dominant colonial standards. Narayan, for instance, includes transliterated, rather than translated, words (such as *karma*, *leela*, *sanyasi*)

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<sup>12</sup> In 1939, Rao co-edited an anthology of Indian thought, *Changing India*, which included excerpts from various revolutionary figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru who would lead India to Independence less than a decade later. A few years later, Rao also co-edited a journal of resistance, significantly entitled *Tomorrow*, which made his sympathies with freedom-fighters yet more obvious.

<sup>13</sup> *Chutnification* is first used by Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children*, in reference to his historiographic, metafictional narrative.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this analogy from Bill Ashcroft's *Caliban's Voice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009). In this book, Ashcroft uses the case of Prospero and his slave Caliban, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to illustrate how the colonial master seeks to perpetuate unequal power relations through the imposition of language and how this process eventually is reversed, as the Caliban-figure, by appropriating the language through literary writing, intervenes in the political domination of colonised cultures.



and also preserves a deliberately idiomatic syntax and vocabulary which allows the language in which his characters are meant to be speaking to resonate through the English; in other words, Narayan constructs his English as if it were a *bhasha* language, without any glossing for the non-Indian reader. This is illustrated by the following quotation from ‘Second Opinion’ in *Malgudi Days*, which might well confuse a reader unaware of the convention in India that a wife refrains from referring to her husband by his name, even after his death:

When *he* was alive, how much service he could command within the twinkling of an eye ... I had to breathe ever so lightly what I needed and he would accomplish it. (Narayan 2006: 186; original emphasis and ellipsis).

There is no indication that the ‘he’ might be referring to her dead husband, just as there would have been none in Tamil or another *bhasha* language.

Rao too takes similar liberties: *Kanthapura* abounds with constant allusions to the numerous Hindu gods and goddesses; unrelated women refer to each other as ‘sister,’ as they would in Kannada and most other *bhasha* languages; characters are identified in terms of where they live or work, for example, as ‘Waterfall Venkamma’ and ‘Coffee-Planter Ramayya’. In his foreword to the novel, Rao asserts: ‘We cannot write like the English. We *should* not’ (Rao 2008: 5). This is borne out by *Kanthapura*’s confessional-style narrative, with its interpolations from the narrator, such as ‘so they say’, and the unusual construction of its sentences, long and awkwardly punctured, which take unpredicted turns and often lose sight of their original purport, so that descriptions seem, in the end, like lists:

Our village—I don’t think you would have heard about it—Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara. [...] Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambè and Champa and Meena passes into the great granaries of trade. (Rao 2008: 7)

Rao’s emphatic comment in his foreword suggests that his objective is to defy Macaulay’s assumed intention of turning the English-literate native Indians into the ‘mimic men’ who would always be neither one thing nor the other. Or, as Bhabha would have put it, breaking away from the standards of the English meant that Indian English writers avoided the uncomfortable position of being ‘almost the same, but not quite’ white (Bhabha 1994: 127).

In this profession of resistance there is none of the violence which Subhas Chandra Bose was elsewhere advocating in India during his striving for freedom. The faithfulness to Gandhi is noticeable, without internalising Gandhi’s unyielding *swadeshi* campaign ideology.<sup>15</sup> These

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<sup>15</sup> ‘*Swadeshi*: things pertaining to one’s own country. A many-faceted national movement which arose in reaction to the Partition of Bengal. At the *economic* level it involved the boycott of British imports. At the *educational* level it introduced national educational institutions in Calcutta’ (Gandhi 2009: 21, n.26).

customary freedom-movements were often strictly, and reductively, led by the ideology of anticolonial nationalism, which later proved to be insufficient in leading into a complete 'post-independence state of liberation,' as pointed out by Sivanandan (2004: 43). By striking a compromise between both the use of their form and medium and the content and style of their writing, the literature in English of this generation thus emerged, amidst all the violence and campaigns for non-violence prevalent in the country, as an act of resistance against the established colonial order, without strictly being in line with the customary freedom-movements of its time.

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