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Work in progress: art and meaning
in divergent literary settings

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“BETWEEN MYTH AND GENIUS”: THE VERY PLACE OF AESTHETICS

RAMONA SIMUȚ*

ABSTRACT. The present paper does not propose that we should look at the field of aesthetics from the perspective of concepts such as artistic taste, artistic value, or the ethical implications of art. These are issues that could be the subject of future investigation in this area, especially in connection with debates surrounding the instrumental value of art. Furthermore, this paper does not seek to define or develop what otherwise are necessary efforts of dealing with the convoluted syntagm *ars gratia artis*, which is sometimes being used to shield artists and their work from gritty scrutiny of the intrinsic nature of art and its lack of immediate, realistic connotations for the general public. What this paper proposes instead is a survey of the evolution of perceptions of art during ancient and Renaissance times, in the hope that it will help to facilitate a more straightforward navigation of the conundrum of designations and views associated with the idea of beauty and nature in art.

KEY WORDS: beauty, mimetism, art, Antiquity, Renaissance

Introduction. The “Margins” of Aesthetics

As a typical definition, aesthetics is considered a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of beauty, art, artistic taste, creation and the idea of beauty in relation with nature. In short, it is viewed as a critical reflection on art, culture and nature.

However, Theodor Adorno in his *Ästhetische Theorie* from 1970 (*Aesthetic Theory*, in its 1977 English translation) surprised with an austere and completely schismatic definition of aesthetics compared to theorizations already offered by other previous schools of thought. Published posthumously, but finding a precedent in his magnum opus *Negative Dialektik*, *Aesthetic Theory* announces from the outset that aesthetics should not be identified primarily

* RAMONA SIMUȚ (PhD 2010, Utrecht University, the Netherlands) is Reader in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania. E-mail: ramona.simut@emanuel.ro.

with the concept of beauty, whose meanings do not do justice to the “entire content of aesthetics”:

If aesthetics were nothing more than a systematic catalogue of whatever is called beautiful, it would give no idea of the life that transpires in the concept of beauty. In terms of the intention of aesthetic reflection, the concept of beauty is but one element. The idea of beauty draws attention to something essential in art, without, however, articulating it directly. If artifacts were not in various ways judged to be beautiful, the interest in them would be incomprehensible and blind, and no one - neither artist nor beholder - would have reason to make that Exodus from the sphere of practical aims, thise of self-preservation and pleasure, that art requires by virtue of its consitution... The history of the Hellenic spirit discerned by Nietzsche is unforgettable because it followed through and presented the historical process between myth and genius. The archaic giants reclining in one of the temples of Agrigento are no more rudiments Than are the demins of Attic drama. Form requires them if it is not to capitulate to myth, which persists in it so long as form merely rejects it. (Adorno 1977: 51)

And Adorno goes on showing that “in all subsequent art of any import [music, sculpture, painting, n.n.] this counterelement to beauty is maintained and transformed” (Adorno 1970: 52), and where it transforms, it no longer contains the features of beauty (see, for instance, Euripides’ tragedies), but of the opposite of beauty: even the gods of Olympus have demons as opponents, and the demons’ feature is not dignity, but violence. This dialectic of art’s identity, the fact that art must at any point stand in contrast to what is percieved to be its objective form, is precisely what drives art between myth (its atemporal essence) and genius (art’s continual quest for innovation, see Adorno 1977: 169).

And yet, historically, aesthetics came to be perceived in the Age of Enlightenment as a separate sphere from philosophy, due to the development of theories about art that brought together sculpture, poetry, painting, music and dance, saying that they had the same origin; as such, they were reunited under the common name les beaux arts. Containing all the idea of beauty, Baumgarten generally called them “aesthetics” in *Reflections on Poetry* (1735). Baumgarten (2022) showed that the term aesthetics designates one of the two branches of knowledge, in addition to reason. Aesthetics became the branch of knowledge studied through sensory experience, through senses and feeling, which for him ensured a distinct type of knowledge from what the abstract ideas studied by logic offer us. The senses, therefore, are the ones that render

the notion and idea of beauty when they recognize it in nature or in oneself, so beauty appears in any context in which the senses seek and find excellence: the visual, plastic and decorative arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, ceramics, tapestry, photography, design, decoupage, assemblage, calligraphy and literature, which, although it uses intuition, needs an external form – the word – to reach expressiveness). In other words, as a conclusion to Adorno's take on the transformation that occurs in the art-nature relationship, "mimesis transformed by art, perhaps even into a version of its opposite, might [...] constitute what Adorno calls 'fulfillment of objectivity'" (Huhn 2004: 11).

And yet, the aspects that aesthetics formulated as the art of beauty imply have raised several problems and questions from Antiquity to the present day:

-when we aesthetically evaluate an object or work of art, must we take into account certain impressions/must we have a certain aesthetic attitude through which one views art and its natural environment?

-is aesthetic experience needed to realize the beauty of a work?

-does the work of art have an intrinsic aesthetic value, just like moral and religious values?

If we claim that aesthetics is a separate and independent category of philosophy, which can explain its terms exclusively on the basis of the senses, on the basis of what is clear, at hand, mediated by the natural senses, then these questions will not be able to receive an answer in relation to the philosophy of art, which studies problems such as the nature of beauty and artistic taste. How else will we be able to solve problems such as the difference between the numerous art pieces (paintings, sculptures), songs, literary creations that seem less valuable than others or even fail to present any kind of artistic value. Moreover, if aesthetics must define beauty as having value for itself and through itself (*ars gratia artis*), then clearly some arts (architecture, ceramics, design, tapestry, etc.) cannot be defined as art, because their function is no longer exclusively related to the sensation of beauty, but instead elapses into the sphere of practicality, since their main purpose is to serve people on account of their utilitarianism.

Moreover, it is said that even the novel as a literary species is not aesthetic and disinterested, because it is not clothed in a sensitive medium. Metal objects, to be sure, could hardly be considered beautiful, as their material is too crude and impersonal. Other creations, such as modern sculpture, use ignoble material, mud even, from which it is impossible to come up with something noble (marble is rare and noble, thus by extension ancient and Renais-

sance works had a higher value than current ones?). Such creations would at most combine the useful with the pleasant, but would not produce exclusively pleasure (feelings, sensations), without mundane interests. If the value of the work does not depend only on itself, on the impression it creates for us and on the power to elevate us, but is also utilitarian, can it still be considered art?

These questions have to do with the different attempts to theorize the artistic phenomenon present in different historical and cultural periods. If Plato and Aristotle, just like their predecessors, emphasized the craft (*technē*), the character of the master revealed in the work (*poiesis*) and the relationship between the work and nature (*mimesis*), accents resumed and reinvigorated by the Renaissance, the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment laid down before our eyes a dialectic of the means and environment of the work: it no longer comes through the mediation of reason, but of the senses. These differences merely opened ever new questions: how should art be interpreted, through the lenses of the craft (*technē*)/capabilities (*poiesis*) of the artist, or by the way in which they render the art-nature correspondence?

Thus, what does one base the aesthetic attitude on? Up to the Enlightenment, the attitude towards beauty was understood, at times, as disinterested engagement (in that the experience we have with the work should not be touched by utilitarianist drives); distancing from personal needs/cares; and contemplation of the object simply for the sensation it creates in and of itself, without being affected by the knowledge I may have about the object.

The truth is perhaps somewhere in the middle, for there cannot be sensory experiences in a pure state, a work created only through the senses, without a certain experience/knowledge of it. In the absence of certain *a-priori* concepts, we cannot explain the essence or reality of the work of art, thus important questions arise as to whether aesthetics can really be seen as a sphere separate from the field of philosophy.

Ancient Aesthetics from Impersonators to Creators

Plato's insistence on reason, and not on feeling, on mathematical truth, not on that of human emotion, comes from his conviction that reality is based on eternal and immutable forms, and not on the material and chaotic existence of people. In the ideal world, says Plato, things exist in perfect form, not being copies, but original forms. This world of forms (truth, essence, ideal) can only be understood through reason and logical argument. Since nature is only a copy, any form of art that reproduces nature is only copying a copy, and is therefore doubly imperfect/inferior.

Plato feared that art and artists could impede social order because they would distract loyal citizens from the pursuit of eternal values/truth, which is the only uncompromising source of goodness/altruism. In the *Republic* (2007: II, III), Plato refers expressly to poets and poetry when he warns that all poetic imitations are deficient for the understanding of the listeners, unless as an antidote they possess knowledge of the true nature of the originals.

Although in other writings (where, for instance, he discusses the nature of inspiration by distinguishing between “ordinary madness” and the threefold manifestations of “divine madness”, see *Phaedrus* 237a7-b1 in Plato 1972), Plato tries to save poetry by urging poets to write about the lives of prominent dignitaries, so that listeners can take up their example of virtue, in the *Republic* he shows that the existence of poets is dangerous for his ideal society, because their art tells lies and encourages irrational behavior. It could be inferred that Plato initiates a theory that takes into account the effect of literature on the reader in, a so to speak, moralizing/didactic/educational criticism. Moral criticism refers only to the content of a literary work, to its positive or harmful effect, and not to its formal or artistic value. Plato also establishes several premises for literary theory, which even challenge today’s structuralist and poststructuralist literary critics, namely that:

- the material world is not real, but only an imperfect copy of the ideal world;
- art represents/reproduces only the perceptible material world;
- beauty, justice and goodness can only be understood through the prism of the truth of the world/ideal form;
- the world is structured binary: rational-irrational; good-bad; man-woman; public-private;
- literature, although important, must be supervised, because it has a strong effect on readers;
- the content of literature (what it says and represents) is more important than its form.

Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle starts from the idea that art is not necessarily a reproduction/imitation of nature, therefore of the world that we experience through the senses, so it is not necessarily an imperfect copy of nature. Art is rather a process by which we place events from nature in a medium (such as words, paint, wood or stone) that perfects or completes nature. Art does not tell lies, but reveals truths in a way other than through rational/logical deduction.

For Aristotle, art is not in binary opposition to reason, so it is not an impediment or a threat to logic or reason; the pleasure that comes from representation/*mimesis* proposes a different kind of truth, not a falsehood that endangers society, because it is driven by practical thought or *technē* (Aristotle 1999: 1139a5-15) which “governs productive action (*poiētikē*)”. This is because reality, says Aristotle, is not an eternal static world of perfect ideal forms, compared to which the material world would appear only as a bland imitation. Reality, says Aristotle, is a world of appearances and perceptions in constant change, the ordinary world of things and events that we experience daily. In the midst of these changing realities, form appears only in concrete circumstances.

If for Plato an apple/a chair were simple imitations, inferior copies of the ideal form of a chair/apple that cannot be accessed through the senses, but only deduced through logical processes, for Aristotle, on the contrary, the only way we can know the essence/substance of the chair/apple is through the individual appearances of the chairs/apples. Form, Aristotle shows, exists only through some concrete examples of it, not through eternal ideal abstractions. In the world that we understand through the senses, the existence of things is based on orderly principles that can be discovered, so that truth comes to us through the discovery of the laws and principles that dictate how things in the material world function and receive meaning.

Aristotle’s thought/philosophy first lays the philosophical foundations of science, because he observes specific phenomena (for example, the way someone sits in a particular chair), and then makes deductions, based on these observations, regarding the laws that dictate the functioning of chairs (see the principle that all chairs must be provided with a seat support). Science, according to Aristotle, catalogs and classifies things in the material world by discovering similarities and differences in their form and by deducing general principles of organization and taxonomy of these forms, rather than individual particularities.

In this vein, for Aristotle, poetry and all other forms of art function according to the rules of biology as science: he wants to identify the characteristics of different forms of poetry and then develop systematic categories for classifying these forms. If Plato evaluated through moral criticism what art/poetry does with/for the audience, Aristotle in his *Poetics* laid the foundations of genre criticism by investigating what poetry is, not what poetry does, and so examined literature according to its internal structure. Thus, when referring to drama, Aristotle sought to determine the formal characteristics of comedy and tragedy.

Comedy, he says, is addressed to ordinary people, the peasants and the common man, while tragedy is addressed to the nobility. The center of Aristotelian aesthetics is occupied by the concept of mimesis, which for him involves the fields of poetry, painting (visual arts) and music. The concept of mimesis defines for Greek philosophers the relationship between works of art and the world (nature, in the later Enlightenment tradition). The original meanings of the word *mimesis* are discussed at length, but the discussions mainly focus on two meanings that, it seems, were also accessible to Plato and Aristotle (since they use the word as if the audience had long known what they were talking about): *memimemenon* (an ancient Egyptian custom of carrying the effigy of a corpse to banquets to plastically highlight the extremely realistic bodily valences of the model that must not be forgotten – *memento mori* – but rendered in art in the same way) and *mimeisthai* (Greek, “to follow, to immitate”), a verb that refers to the reproduction/copying of reality/appearance.

Nonetheless, Plato does not encourage *mimesis* as an effort to represent in fact or in reality a certain entity/truth, because the (physical) form is in tense relations with the Ideal/true reality (spiritual – rational). Rather, Plato (see the dialogue *Ion*) proposes to understand mimesis as imitation-copy, with reference to the correspondence between sign and meaning (e.g. Herodotus, in his *Histories*, made the analogy/correspondence/similarity between the ancient ornamented colonnades and palm leaves, saying that the said colonnades resemble palm trees, and not that they are palm trees, because colonnades cannot represent/signify anything). Just as the art of ornamental colonnades presupposes some “craft” (*technē, technai*) or experience, so the art of writing, painting, sculpting is based on experience and is a proof of the artist’s craft or skill (see Aristotle 1999: VI).

Aristotle somewhat takes over the sense of *mimesis* from Plato, with an important difference, however. Plato does not give any importance to creativity or artistic inventiveness, and the aesthetic act had to be based on experience and pre-existing principles, on something that already exists in nature or outside it (the gods). In fact, Aristotle in *Metaphysics* (1961: I-IX, X-XIV) and in also his *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Aristotle 1999) keeps the *a priori* argument, according to which the craft (which is rational, as in Plato) is a source or aesthetic process involving *epistēmē* or knowledge, since it is a practice that requires theoretical understanding as well. However, Aristotle tries to complete a combination between: the artist’s ability or skill to create the work of art (called *poiesis*), the development of genres or literary tradition in which that work appeared, and the relationship between the work of art and reality

or nature (called *mimesis*). In this relationship, the artist's inventiveness or creativity receives some credit, but only along the lines of the artist's nature (which may be inclined towards serious or humorous works) and the seriousness with which he approaches art.

An example given by Aristotle in this sense is the Homeric epic, where the poet's inspiration in creating the work of art (*poiesis*) depends on the extent to which the poet uses his skills or his knowledge (*technē*) in the field and on his innate qualities (*phusis*), including intelligence. Therefore, in Aristotle the sources of aesthetics (*poiesis*) are three (skill/*technē*, genre tradition and internal and external nature: *phusis* and *mimesis*), while in Plato there were at best two: *technē* and *mimesis*, the inspiration or creativity being likened to the madness by which some people differ from others who do not stand out.

Renaissance Aesthetics and Its Incentives

The Renaissance covered through its wide influence, the 14th-17th centuries in Italy, the 16th century in France, Germany and the Low Countries (Holland, Flanders-Belgium) and the 17th century in England and Spain. According to the name, the Renaissance meant broadly a revival of the interest in man and his inner rational universe, but also in the arts, in contrast to the Middle Ages, considered by the then people to have been traditionalist, dogmatic and fanatical, so the Renaissance itself would be modernist in comparison to it. And so it was, all the more so in the literature of renown representative writers of Renaissance humanism, such as Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), François Rabelais (1494-1553), Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), Lope de Vega (1526-1635), Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681). That being said, the innermost aspects of these writers' works and the peculiarities of Renaissance art, even those expressed by late-Renaissance mannerism (see Murray and Murray 1963: 148), are not what we are envisaging here. On the contrary, the preliminaries that defined art at its highest concern us more, since they show this period to be above all dominated by the impetus to acquire knowledge rather than to expand the realm of the senses.

As expected, the Renaissance of culture, arts and sciences needed preliminary conditions for its emergence, namely several economic and socio-political necessities that would ensure a favorable environment for its development. With the emergence of the middle class (*bourgeoisie*) in Italy, as opposed to medieval feudalism, this country was the first in which the signs of a new

ideological wave oriented towards man appeared. Humanism is, in fact, a synonymous term for the Renaissance, having two main connotations, of which the first, more broad and encompassing, is defined as love for people, while the second, narrow and chronological, as interest in the past values of Antiquity. Because the Middle Ages had approached Antiquity in a truncated and restrictive way through the prism of Catholic dogmas, the Renaissance makes Antiquity a model of creation and inspiration in all forms of art (architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, philosophy, theology), but the Renaissance did not manifest itself only in the artistic sense, but was an intellectual movement.

From its inception, the Italian Renaissance showed several features considered of the utmost importance, such as:

1. the supporting of trade, which implied free movement between the Italian city-states, and the development of crafts;
2. the great geographical discoveries/expeditions (Marco Polo in China, Christopher Columbus in the Americas, alongside Spanish navigators, etc.), thus expanding the known geographical space compared to that of the Middle Ages;
3. the invention of the printing press in Gutenberg, Germany in cca. 1440, with consequences throughout Europe at that time, allowing for the rapid multiplication and circulation of scientific and literary productions at minimal costs;
4. the discovery of ancient manuscripts in Classical Greek and Latin, documents that were carefully studied and indeed revived the long lost passion for these languages and for the cultural fields that they impacted. Literary, philosophical, and theological texts began to be looked upon in a new light (see Marsilio Ficino's translation of Plato from Greek into Latin), more critical and using a more precise terminology, faithful to the originals, that is, a result of which being that the trust in the apocrypha was greatly suppressed;
5. the development of archaeology with the financial support of patrons, unearthing walls, statues, and lost treasures of the Antiquity (see Cosimo de' Medici in Florence, who supported sculptors, painters and architects such as Raphael, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Perugino, Bellini, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.);
6. the emergence of great libraries museums, and new style palaces (the Uffizzi Galleries, Palazzo Medici-Ricardi, Palazzina di Belvedere, Palazzo Strozzi, Giardino di Boboli in Florence, etc.), bookstores for public use, cathedrals endowed with sculptures and paintings by famous artists of the

- time, and also academies in the ancient style, all of which made Renaissance seem like a realm of “humanism, magic, and science” (see Grafton in Goodman and MacKay 1990: 117);
7. the conquest of Greek Byzantium/Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, a turning point for the Greek population in the area, was followed by the exile of the elevated Greeks who took refuge from Islam in Italy and especially in Florence and Venice; they brought with them the knowledge of ancient and Koine/Hellenistic Greek as reflected in the reacquired manuscripts, a language whose particularities had long been forgotten by the Western World. The newly arrived Greeks who were employed in the Italian universities (for instance Manuel Chrysoloras and G. Gemisthus Pletho) helped make Classicism flourish and rekindled the interest in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, thus making their time a reactionary one in comparison with the previous historical/ecclesiastical conformism (see Loomis 1908: 251-252);
 8. the appearance of utopian writings throughout European literature (*utopia*, from the Greek οὐ τόπος/ou topos/“no place”, or “perfect/ideal place/island), a place free from vain teachings, which, precisely because it could not be specifically localized, had a universal character. Utopias became popular also as a result of new geographical discoveries and social realities, such as the Turkish invasion, the exile of Greek-rite Christians into Western cities, the new biblical texts hermeneutics, the rationalist model in social organization (see such works written by the great humanists and theologians of the time, like Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* from 1516, or the empiricist philosopher Sir Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* from 1626);
 9. the writing of treatises of social and court morals with portraits of the ideal king, such as *Il Principe/The Prince* (1513/1532) by Niccolò Machiavelli (1464-1527) from Florence, a cornerstone of the Renaissance, wherein politics becomes an objective science by promoting centralized power and consolidated authority (an idea especially manifested in the execution of Girolamo Savonarola and the reinstatement of de Medici family in Florence). According to *The Prince* (1998: 21, 45) the ideal leader or “principal-ity” (be it secular or ecclesiastical) could resort, if necessary, to less orthodox tactics in Order to ensure the well-being of his citizens. To be sure, this is the political and social realm in which Renaissance aesthetics thrived in the midst of power, money, privilege, and innovation, and in which, along with social crisis and political tyranny, a new idea of art imbued with the cult of form, thus objectified, emerged in the republic (see Baron 1996).

Through all these peculiarities, the Renaissance returned to Protagoras' ancient motto "man as measure of all things" (in Diels and Krantz 1968; and Plato 1996) and the greatest wonder of the world (see Sophocles in *Antigone*), aiming to reach the ideal of the universal man in the sense of belonging to a unified world/continent/Europe as a spiritual and cultural space. The multi-faceted or polymath man of the Renaissance was an individual harmoniously developed as a physical being, intellectually cultivated, and also appreciating beauty and action in the footsteps of François Rabelais (for whom man was an "abyss of science", who learns both classical humanities and geometry and physics) and Picco della Mirandola, who upheld scientific truth as a return to Platonism (see Blum 2014: 26). On the same note, in his famous essay *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Mirandola declared that he was the fiercest follower of Italian humanism, maintaining that in the created Order, man should not be "content with a lower place [than seraphim and cherubim], imitate them in their Glory and dignity. If we choose to, we will not be second to them in anything" (Mirandola, *Oration*, 4).

Starting with painting and continuing with literature, the Renaissance man is recommended, as an aesthetic attitude, to "carefully study the great model of nature" based on a scientific knowledge of it. Such model was Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian man", a sketch based on his experience following a series of medical experiments on cadavers, because of which he was banned from Florence and thus from under the protective wing of Cosimo de' Medici by representatives of the Catholic Church. The portrait technique, the refined details of faces and forms, and also the Renaissance inventions and the artistic sketches remained models throughout history up until the Modern art at the end of the 19th century. But as it happens, the nature that Renaissance artists emulated was similar to the political *status quo*, at times fantastic and grotesque, in staunch defiance of the "ideal", fixed world of Plato, an aspect easily grasped in both paintings and literary works. Renaissance aesthetics at the end of this artistic movement was increasingly mannerist, and in the end exaggerations such as those in Parmigianino's portraits, Rabelais' characters or the novels' picaresque materialized naturally, just like the harmonious bodies before them (Lopez 1970; Haughton 2004: 229).

Conclusions

We have seen Plato introducing a new approach to art based on his take on the concept of *mimesis*, one that considers, for instance, the impact of literature on the reader from a moral and didactic perspective, showing that moral

criticism pertains only to the content of the work with its positive or negative impact, and not to its formal or artistic merit. Additionally, he posits several tenets regarding the nature of art, in the belief that the material world does not reflect the ideal world accurately. Thus, concepts such as beauty and goodness can only be fully grasped when looked at through the lenses of the truth of the ideal form. Since the world is structured in binary opposition, and since more often than not artists are prone to use imagination rather than reason in their pursuit of the work, they must be especially subject to scrutiny due to their appeal to the sense and thus their immediate influence on readers as fraudsters.

On the other hand, Aristotle art is far from standing in binary opposition to logic, and thus it is not a threat to it. More likely, the pleasure derived from representing reality/mimesis in art proposes a different kind of truth and it is driven by practical thought/*technē* which governs productive action/the work of art. In opposition to Plato's ideal, fixed world, Aristotle is adamant that reality is an world of ever-changing perceptions, comprising the ordinary world and people's daily experiences as well. Given these evolving realities, form manifests solely in the context of specific circumstances.

Supposedly, the Renaissance art was meant to be a return to these particular tenets on art and the artist. The rise of the middle class in Italy with its new social ideology, placed the individual at its core, hence the term humanism, which is often used as a synonym for the Renaissance, with two main connotations in its love for man and Antiquity. If the Middle Ages had approached Antiquity in a restrictive way, the Renaissance made the latter a model of creation and inspiration in all forms of art. However, given the materialistic whims and political emancipation of the Renaissance, its art was bound to immitate and serve the state propaganda of its financiers, and once more the emphasis was placed on the form in matters pertaining to sensibility and artistic creation.

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“I WOULD PREFER NOT TO” IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING NOTHING *IN MY YEAR OF REST
AND RELAXATION*

CHIA-CHIEH MAVIS TSENG*

ABSTRACT. This essay argues for the value of doing nothing in the 21st century, challenging the pervasive belief that inactivity is synonymous with laziness or irresponsibility. In today’s “attention economy,” doing nothing has shifted from being a luxury to becoming a necessity. Rather than advocating for a complete withdrawal from technology or suggesting rest merely as a means to future productivity, this essay calls for a critical reassessment of how we allocate our time and attention in an increasingly interconnected world. By examining the growing cultural significance of non-doing and non-response in contemporary literature, it explores how these practices challenge the relentless demands of modern life. Central to this analysis are Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853). Through a comparative analysis of the protagonists’ acts of non-doing, I will argue that these forms of passive resistance reveal the hidden value of stepping outside the cycle of perpetual productivity and consumption.

KEY WORDS: Bartleby, digital age, doing nothing, attention economy, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Introduction

This essay argues for the value of doing nothing in the digital age, exploring how these acts are represented and reimagined in 21st-century literature. While the thesis may initially seem counterintuitive—since doing nothing is often equated with laziness or apathy, and ghosting criticized as irresponsible or immature—recent critics have highlighted the potential power of inactivity, non-response, and unavailability in today’s world. In the “attention

* CHIA-CHIEH MAVIS TSENG (Ph.D in Comparative Literature, Rutgers University, New Jersey, 2013) is Director of and Associate Professor at the Language Center of Taipei Medical University, with an interest in visual culture, urban modernity, and the works of Amy Levy, Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Tati. Her most recent book is *Memory Made, Hacked, and Outsourced* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). E-mail: mavistseng@tmu.edu.tw.

economy,” doing nothing is no longer a luxury reserved for the privileged; rather, non-doing and non-response are increasingly vital in the 21st century. This essay does not advocate for a complete abandonment of technology or a retreat into isolation; rather, it calls for a shift in how we direct our attention, reassess how we spend our time, and recognize the importance of one’s right to do or say nothing in an always-connected, 24/7 society.

This research explores the growing significance of non-doing and non-response in 21st-century literature. Focusing on Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*,” I examine how Moshfegh’s female protagonist embodies Bartleby’s passive resistance—his famous refrain, “I would prefer not to”—in the context of the digital age. Through this comparison, I analyze the similarities and differences in their approaches to non-engagement, the practices they adopt, and the personal and social transformations that result.

“Paying” Your Attention in the Digital Age

In the 21st century, we are immersed in addictive technologies that fuel a culture of busyness, where multitasking and productivity are highly valued in our fast-paced society. In her 2007 bestseller *One Person / Multiple Careers: A New Model for Work/Life Success*, Marci Alboher encourages people to embrace “slash” careers—balancing multiple roles—by leveraging technology that enables work from anywhere. The pervasive influence of social media and communication technologies has fundamentally altered how we direct our attention and use our time. It is now crucial to critically examine the (non-)neutrality of these technologies and reflect on the user experience. We must ensure that technology serves us, rather than the other way around.

Tristan Harris (2017), former design ethicist at Google, explains how our minds are unwittingly hijacked by our phones, with a few tech companies exerting unethical control over billions of people every day. Social media, websites, apps, and digital platforms all share one hidden agenda: to capture and monopolize our attention, maximizing both our emotional and time investments. Throughout the day, we are constantly bombarded by information, news, pop-up ads, and notifications. On YouTube, “in-video links” and “autoplay” push us into endless viewing cycles. Streaming services like Netflix, Apple+, and Disney+ prompt us to “skip to the next episode” or “autoplay the next episode,” keeping us glued to the screen. Facebook, for example, programs its algorithm to favor provoca-

tive, controversial, and outrage-driven posts, because they generate more reactions and engagement: "Posts that prompted lots of reaction emojis tended to keep users more engaged, and keeping users engaged was the key to Facebook's business" (Merrill and Oremus). Even features like the "photo" tag are designed to vie for our attention. These seemingly trivial design choices collectively foster an "onto-the-next" mentality, contributing to the rise of the "attention economy."

We grow used to prompts to encourage us to express ourselves on social media (Facebook's "What's on your mind?"), to respond to things (for Facebook, options to hit "like," "haha," "wow," "sad" and "angry"); at work or in our social life, we receive and reply messages from all kinds of portals (IM, DM, LINE, whatsapp, emails), and fill out questionnaires via Google form or SurveyCake. Our online presence is getting mandatory and the time we spend online is getting longer and longer because of COVID-19. We have virtual meetings, online classes, and we work from home. All of a sudden we are requested to stay online, whether we like it or not.

Technology does bring us convenience; however, like drugs, it comes with side effects—it brings us confusion, anxiety, envy, self-doubts, or a new syndrome called FOMO (fear of missing out). One feels bad while being "unliked" or "unfollowed." Communication technologies allow us to reach other people at one click, anytime anywhere. Mary (Drew Barrymore) in the movie *He's Just Not That into You* (2009) once laments that new technology complicates dating culture which is more frustrating:

I had a guy leave me a voice mail at work, so I called him at home. And then he e-mailed me to my Blackberry and so I texted to his cell and then he e-mailed me to my home account, and then the whole thing just got out of control. And I miss the days when you had one phone number and one answering machine. And that one answering machine housed one cassette tape. And that one cassette tape either had a message from the guy or it didn't. And now you just have to go around checking all these different portals just to get rejected by seven different technologies.

Communication technologies introduce a new culture to our dating, recruitment, business, or any other social circumstances. We will no longer have heartbreaking stories of lost mails, changed addresses, and missed calls... think about the lost phone number which keeps the hero and the heroine apart in the movie *Serendipity* (2001) or *Turn Left, Turn Right* (2003). In the digital age, if a message fails to get a reply—it is fair to conclude that the addressee simply does not want to respond.

In the past, we debated how quickly to respond to an email, careful not to reply too soon lest we appear desperate or too idle. Today, digital micro-communication users are far more concerned with the timing between text messages. As Jessica Bennett discusses in her 2014 article “Bubbles Carry a Lot of Weight: Texting Anxiety Caused by Little Bubbles,” we experience what she calls “texting anxiety” when we see the “typing awareness indicator”—those little bubbles that show someone is drafting a response on iMessage, Facebook Messenger, or Google Chat. Bennett describes this as “the tyranny of the text bubble”—the modern-day technological minutiae that traps us in a specific kind of cognitive stress. She also explores the pressure of being perpetually available through mobile devices. The “typing awareness indicator” itself has become a message, signaling both “Hold on, I’m responding” and, paradoxically, “I’m not responding.” As Ron Palmeri, founder of a communications start-up, notes, it’s the digital equivalent of saying, “I’m here, but not quite yet.”

The anxiety of receiving no response—coupled with the expectation of a prompt reply—brings us to the phenomenon of “ghosting,” a term that gained widespread popularity by 2015. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ghosting is defined as “the act or practice of abruptly cutting off all contact with someone (such as a former romantic partner), usually without explanation, by no longer accepting or responding to phone calls, instant messages, etc.” Ghosting is especially common in online dating, where apps make it easy to meet new people, quickly disengage, and move on. As a result, ghosting has become a negative social behavior; not responding or severing ties without closure is seen as unacceptable. Many articles highlight how being ghosted can harm mental health and erode self-worth. We feel particularly hurt by ghosting because, as the saying goes, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Author Simon Sinek argues that ghosting reflects a lack of confrontation skills, calling it a bad habit that adults should outgrow. In response, websites like *End Ghosting* (<https://end-ghosting.com>) advocate for “no ghosting” in recruitment, while new dating apps like *Elate Date* (<https://www.elate-date.com>) market themselves as “designed for less swiping, less ghosting.”

In short, digital culture prizes 24/7 availability online and condemns anything that contradicts this constant connectivity. Yet, interestingly, a 2018 study (Freedman et al.) of 1,300 participants found that 25% had ghosted someone, while 20% had been ghosted themselves. In other words, while ghosting is widely criticized, it remains a common practice. On the other hand, some defend ghosting, arguing that sometimes no response is the ap-

propriate response, and that it may be problematic to assume one is always entitled to a timely reply. Critics and writers are increasingly advocating for the value of “doing nothing,” recognizing that, in the digital age, we are literally “paying” for our attention. Michael Greaney, for example, argues that we should actively cultivate our “laziness” in this attention economy:

And it seems to me that the relentlessness with which we pay attention – and I think we can take the word pay literally in this context – suggests that there are no limits to the attention economy... If one of the effects of contemporary technology is to make us work even when we think we are playing, then the attention economy has succeeded in finding ways of cap-turing infinite labour from homo otiosus. Once upon a time, the work ethic taught us that human beings cannot afford to be lazy; however, if we are going to avoid being defined as creatures of the attention economy, then we can't afford not to be lazy. In fact, we're probably going to have to roll up our sleeves and work at it. (Greaney 2016: 188-89)

Ghosting, not responding, or choosing silence also finds its place in the realm of literature. Deleuze, for instance, discusses the “right to say nothing,” noting that “the problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing small gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief it is to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then can there be a chance of framing the rare, or ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying” (Deleuze 1995: 129). Similarly, Derrida explores the concept of “the right to absolute nonresponse,” arguing that literature, which traditionally grants the “authorization to say everything” (a concept tied to democracy and the apparent hyper-responsibility of the “subject”), must also recognize the right to absolute nonresponse. As Jonathan Culler elaborates,

absolute nonresponse might mean, for instance, *Bartleby's* “I would prefer not to” in Melville's story... The right to absolute nonresponse: this is startling, for this right, like the right to privacy, dose not seem to have been incorporated in our Bill of Rights— but it makes a good deal of sense. The right to nonresponse can be of essential feature of democracy, for it is totalitarian to require that one respond, to call one to answer for everything. (Culler 2013: 89)

Building on Culler's argument, the right to absolute nonresponse critiques the societal expectation of constant engagement and justification. In both litera-

ture and life, choosing not to respond becomes an act of resistance, offering freedom from the pressure to always be available or provide answers.

Doing Nothing

At this point, it is necessary to rethink and redefine concepts such as “labor,” “productivity,” “usefulness,” “busyness,” “leisure,” “laziness,” “off-time,” “inactivity,” as well as the rights to “idleness,” “non-response,” “withdrawal,” “not answering,” “no-shows,” and “ghosting.” Historically, busyness and labor have been linked to social status and moral value. As Henry Ford once stated, “To my mind, there is nothing worse than an idle life. Nobody should suffer that.” The eight-hour workday movement, which emerged during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, was a response to the grueling 10- to 16-hour workdays of the time. Robert Owen, a founder of utopian socialism, famously advocated for “Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest.” A 19th-century silkscreen poster echoed this sentiment: “Eight hours for work, Eight hours for rest, and Eight hours for what we will.” This final “what we will” was intended to include personal time for self-improvement, education, and leisure. In the modern “labor battle” over time, time has come to be seen primarily as an economic resource, making it difficult to justify spending it on “nothing.” If someone chooses to do nothing when they are expected to be working, they are often seen as lazy, irresponsible, or unprofessional, failing to meet social expectations.

In 2006, Tom Lutz writes a book entitled *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America*. In recent years, however, books on doing nothing usually take a new perspective: Carolien Janssen’s *Niksen: The Dutch Art of Doing Nothing* (2018), Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), Olga Mecking’s *Niksen: Embracing the Dutch Art of Doing Nothing* (2020), Tess Janson’s *Niksen: The Power of Doing Nothing* (2020); and Celeste Headless’s *Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving* (2020). “Niksen” comes from Dutch philosophy of doing nothing, and is considered a coping strategy for stressful modern life. Carolien Hamming, managing director of a coaching center in Netherlands that serves people with stress and burnout, says Niksen means “to do nothing, to be idle or doing something without any use” (Hamming in Gottfried 2019). Doreen Dodgen-Magee, a psychologist and the author of “Devised! Balancing Life and Technology in a Digital World,” likens niksen to “a car whose engine is running but isn’t going anywhere” (Dodgen-Magee in Mecking in *Times* 2019).

One of the earliest pioneers of doing nothing was Diogenes of Sinope, a philosopher who lived in 4th century BC Athens and later Corinth. Often described by Plato as "Socrates gone mad," Diogenes was famously known as "the man who lived in a tub." He rejected material possessions, embraced a life of laziness, and wandered the streets without purpose. Diogenes often subverted social norms by walking backward down the street or entering a theater as everyone was leaving. In the hustle of the city, "Diogenes, who had nothing to do and from whom no one was willing to ask anything, began at once to roll his tub up and down the Craneum with great energy. When asked why, his reply was, "Just to make myself look as busy as the rest of you" (Odell 2019: 66-67). When Alexander the Great once found him lounging in the sun and offered to grant him any wish, Diogenes famously responded, "Yes, stand out of my light" (Odell 2019: 67). Jenny Odell interprets Diogenes' actions as a lesson in refusal: "It's important to note that, faced with the unrelenting hypocrisy of society, Diogenes did not flee to the mountains (like some philosophers) or kill himself (like others). He neither assimilated to nor fully exited society; instead, he lived in its midst, in a permanent state of refusal" (Odell 2019: 68).

Similarly, in the late 19th century, Oscar Wilde addressed the value of doing nothing in his essay *The Critic as Artist* (1891): "Let me say to you now that to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual. To Plato, with his passion for wisdom, this was the noblest form of energy. To Aristotle, with his passion for knowledge, this was the noblest form of energy also." Wilde suggests that true intellectual clarity arises in moments of stillness, a sentiment echoed by Plato and Aristotle, who believed that wisdom and knowledge require space for reflection, not just active pursuit.

"I Would Prefer Not to"

When it comes to the themes of doing nothing, giving no (proper) answers, one can never ignore Herman Melville's 1853 short story: "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." The story is told from the perspective of an old, experienced lawyer who runs a law office. Everything seems to work well until the new scrivener Bartleby shows up and challenges the pre-existing assumptions and social values. At first Bartleby appears to be a helpful employee. On the third day of his job, however, when asked to proofread a document with his colleagues, Bartleby replies "in a singularly mild, firm voice": "I would prefer not to" (Melville 1989: 165).

The narrator who has “haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance” finds this answer absurd and unacceptable:

I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume. But in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, “I would prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to,” echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it,” and I thrust it towards him.

“I would prefer not to,” said he. (Melville 1989: 165-66)

The narrator is giving an order, not asking a question, and Bartleby is not in a position to make any choices. The unexcused disobedience is regarded as perverse or pathological, an excess or violation of the social norm. Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is a short-circuit, a faulty connection which occurs in an efficient network, in which the hierarchy of the workplace determines how people talk and act. With a mixed sense of confusion and indignation, the narrator tries to clarify his order, but in vain. His next move is to walk toward Bartleby and “thrust” the paper toward him, as if he is going to force him to do the task.

“I would prefer not to”

“But why?”

“At present I prefer to give no answer.”

And then for the rest of the story, the mysterious Bartleby only repeats “I would prefer not to” to his boss and colleagues and ceases working at all. Later he refuses to leave the office building and becomes a trouble for the narrator. Alexander Cooke reads Deleuze’s reading of the story, “Bartleby does not refuse to do anything. If Bartleby had said ‘I will not,’ his act of resistance would have merely negated the law. Having negated in relation to the law, this transgression would have perfectly fulfilled the law’s function” (Odell 2019: 71). Odell finds Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” “a real refusal” because it “refuses the terms of the question itself” (2019: 91).

Another Bartleby-like character could be found in Mike Judge’s black comedy *Office Space* (1999), a movie that ridicules the modern workplace culture in a typical mid-to-late-1990s software company. The main character Peter Gibbons is a drone who abominates the tedious job and nagging bosses

who destroy his self-esteem. He lives a life without interiority, and he works merely for the purpose to pay the bill and follow the majority and social propriety. His monotonous life has radically changed after his visit to a hypnotist. He suddenly dares to do nothing. When asked what he is doing, he replied with joy, "I did nothing. I did absolutely nothing. And it was everything I thought it could be!" *Office Space* shows a romanticized version of inaction, and Peter gets to live a life he dreams about under hypnosis—spending time with his new girlfriend Joanna (Jennifer Aniston) and getting rid of his boring work and demanding boss. Like the old lawyer in the *Bartleby* story, Peter's annoying boss Bill Lundbergh, who finds it reasonable to ask his employees to come to office on Saturdays and Sundays, is caught off guard when his demands are rejected bluntly. Peter could be seen as a modern and comic version of *Bartleby* in the 20th century, and he is more fortunate than his predecessor. While *Bartleby* dies in jail, Peter is promoted in the company, and even gets away from embezzlement. In the end we see Peter discovers a new sense of fulfillment in his new construction job.

Sometimes doing nothing is the most radical form of rebellion. For Slavoj Žižek, *Bartleby's* story tells us how to cope with the geopolitical and economic deadline, capital realism. In his own words, "Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly (acts like providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities, and so on). The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active,' to 'participate,' to mask the Nothingness of what goes on" (Žižek 2006: 334). He foregrounds the value of doing nothing: "Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" (Žižek 2008: 217).

For Gilles Deleuze, *Bartleby's* "I would prefer not to" forms a "formula." In his own words,

Bartleby is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal. It is like the novels of Kleist, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, or Beckett, with which it forms a subterranean and prestigious lineage. It means only what it says, literally. And what it says and repeats is I would prefer not to. This is the formula of its glory, which every loving reader repeats in turn. (Deleuze 1997: 68)

Referring to Blanchot, Deleuze believes that *Bartleby* reflects on "pure patient passivity" and he is living in state of "being as being, and nothing more. He is urged to say yes or no. But if he said no (to collating, running errands...), or if he said yes (to copying), he would quickly be defeated and judged useless, and

would not survive. He can survive only by whirling in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance” (Deleuze 1997: 71).

In an interview with *Le Monde*, Roland Barthes famously advocated for “daring to be lazy,” championing a “glorious” form of idleness that is closely linked to freedom. However, Pierre Saint-Amand suggests that Barthes’ version of laziness is actually a form of procrastination. He argues, “His resistance is in fact more a reflex of procrastination, of diversion: it consists of constantly deferring, of putting off until tomorrow what is to be done” (Saint-Amand 2001: 519). Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s ideas, Saint-Amand contends that this procrastination is not passive but an active form of resistance—a way to exert control over life’s events by disrupting their programmed flow and delaying the inevitable.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018)

Ottessa Moshfegh’s 2018 novel *The Year of Rest and Relaxation* tells a story about an unnamed narrator who decides to do nothing and sleep for a year. As an American writer of Croatian and Iranian descent, Ottessa Moshfegh is one of the most successful and provocative novelists in the 21st century Anglophone literature. Jia Tolentino describes her as “easily the most interesting contemporary American writer on the subject of being alive when being alive feels terrible.” She has published the novella *McGlue* (2014), her first novel *Eileen* (2015), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; a collection of 14 short stories *Homesick for Another World* (2017). *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), a peculiar story about profound lassitude and ennui, hit the New York Time best seller, and Buzzread, the Washington Post and NPR have named it a best book of year. It is said that there is a film adaptation in the works. She published her next novel *Death in Her Hands* in 2020, which landed a major deal (\$500,000 or more).

We all have a day like this: waking up reluctantly, and feeling like staying in bed the whole day, ordering pizzas, doing nothing, shutting out the entire world. The narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* feels exactly this way, the only difference is that she pulls off to extend this day to almost a year. As a beautiful, rich, and young woman, the narrator drugs herself to sleep to lose track of time for a year. Before she engaged in this project, she has a decent life: she is Columbia-educated, owing an apartment with doormen in the Upper East side, has a job in a Chelsea art gallery, has an on-and-off relationship with a guy called Trevor, hangs out with her friend Rexa—she

frequently thinks about how to end their relationship. One day, it is as if she decides to say *Bartleby's* "I would prefer not to" to the whole world, she becomes desperate to take a sabbatical from her life, "I had started 'hibernating' as best I could in mid-June of 2000. I was twenty-six years old. I watched summer die and autumn turn cold and gray through a broken slat in the blinds. My muscles withered" (Moshfegh 2018: 3). She detaches herself from the hustle and bustle of the urban life outside,

Things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep—reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream. It was easy to ignore things that didn't concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn't matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn't have worried. (Moshfegh 2018: 4)

The narrator remains vague about why she begins her project with a "goal of doing nothing" (2018: 186) "I can't point to any one event that resulted in my decision to go into narcotic-induced hibernation. Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to have everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the word around me" (2018: 17-18). At work, she would nap in the supply closet during lunch break,

I went straight into black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness. I was neither scared nor elated in that space. I had no visions. I had no ideas. If I had a distinct thought, I would hear it, and the sound of it would echo and echo until it got absorbed by the darkness and disappeared. There was no response necessary. No insane conversation with myself. It was peaceful... There was no work to do, nothing I had to counteract or compensate for because there was nothing at all, period. And yet I was aware of the nothingness. I was awake in the sleep, somehow. I felt good. Almost happy. (Moshfegh 2018: 39-40)

Sleep becomes irresistible, and literally the only thing she wants, "Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (2018: 46). It is her belief that a whole year of rest and relaxation would make her awake "renewed, reborn." She believes that "I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the

old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be but a dream, and I could start over without regret, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation” (2018: 51). The NPR review of this book calls the novel “a rest-oration drama” and the narrator’s one year hibernation a “self-preservational” project.

With her privilege and money and house she inherited, the narrator could be criticized as apathy. It is indeed a luxury to afford to reject the whole world without acknowledging the other people’s existence or worrying about how to pay bills. Yet her year of rest and relaxation shows that she has a very weak social connection and lacks meaningful personal relationship. She is orphaned, losing her parents—her scientist father to cancer and her alcoholic mother to suicide, and sadly their deaths came only six weeks apart. What saddens the narrator more, ironically, is how aloof and distant they were when her parents were alive, “I’d feel sorry for myself, not because I missed my parents, but because there was nothing they could have given me if they’d lived, they weren’t my friends. They didn’t comfort me or give me good advice. They weren’t people I wanted to talk to. They barely knew me.”

The review in *Slate* points out that the narrator is fed up with “unrequited love” in her life, which is obvious in her relationship with her late parents, her obsession with her ex who no longer wants to talk to her, and her unkindness to her friend Rexa who claims that she would love her no matter what happens. *The Guardian* review suggests that the narrator’s project is “an organised effacement of the self,” for “she’s already been made abject and partially erased by everyone she knows.” Her mother used Valium to keep her asleep as a baby, her father simply ignored her, even their deaths were “acts of absent-minded rejection.”

In her meager waking hours, she would zone out in front of Whoopi Goldberg or Harrison Ford movies, make reluctant but necessary trips to do grocery shopping, or pick up pills at pharmacy. She also has monthly appointments with Dr. Tuttle, an incompetent shrink who hands out pills like candies, and she has to deal with her friend Reva’s occasional uninvited visits. Sometimes she wakes up and tests if something has changed inside her, “I decided I would test myself to see what was left of my emotions, what kind of shape I was in after so much sleep. My hope as that I’d healed enough over half a year’s hibernation, I’d become immune to painful memories. So I thought back to my father’s death again. I had been very emotional when it happened. I figured any tears I still had left to cry might be about him...” (Moshfegh 2018: 137-38). Her project of doing nothing seemed to work, “The memory should

have rustled up some grief in me. It should have reignited the coals of woe. But it didn’t... I felt almost nothing” (2018: 140).

Later in her hibernation project, she realizes that one side effect of *Infermiterol*, one fictional drug, is three-day blackouts, during which she functions normally without any memories. She is not only sleep-walking, she is “sleep-living.” She would call her ex, going clubbing, scheduling waxing and spa sessions, going shopping spree, and sexting with strangers online. In order to prevent herself from doing a lot of normal stuff during her sleep, which is against her “goal of doing nothing” (2018: 186), she realizes that she “needed to be locked up (2018: 254). She puts her phone in Tupperware and duct-tapes it shut, and she changes her lock on her front door so she can ask an acquaintance to lock her in. With these pre-arrangements, the narrator continues to sleep, only waking up every three days to eat. It seems to be a project of “purging”—getting rid of the deadwood of her old self in order to become a new one. Miraculously, it begins to work, “I could feel the certainty of a reality leeching out of me like calcium from a bone. I was starving my mind into obliqueness. I felt less and less” (2018: 270).

Toward the end of her one year project, she comes to once and is crying in the dark, “I could hear myself gasp and whimper. I focused on the sound and then the universe narrowed into a fine line, and that felt better because there was a clearer trajectory, so I traveled more peacefully through outer space, listening to the rhythm of my respiration, each breath an echo of the breath before, softer and softer, until I was far enough away that there was no sound, there was no movement. There was no need for reassurance or directionality because I was nowhere, doing nothing. I was nothing. I was gone” (2018: 276). She claims, “On June 1, 2001. I came to in a cross-legged seated position on the living room floor. I was alive” (2018: 276).

The narrator has another significant “I would prefer not to” moment when she is appreciating works of art. After she ends her year of rest and relaxation, one day she goes to Mets, drawn by a work of art, she stands too close. One staff tells her to “Step back, please” “Step away!” at that precise moment, the narrator feels an epiphany—instead of stepping away as requested, she touches the frame and then even the canvas,

The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn’t exist yet. I was making it, stranding there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with

stillness, trying to capture something—a thought, I guess—as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings—that time could be contained, held captive. I didn't know what was true. So I did not step back. Instead, I put my hand out. I touched the frame of the painting. And then I placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just *things*. (Moshfegh 2018: 286-87)

She does not feel unsettled, “That was it. I was free” (2018: 287), as if her year of rest and relaxation, her year of doing nothing is officially a success. “My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now. I could survive without the house... I could move on” (2018: 288). Little does she know that her significant moment of rebirth, ironically, happens in early September in 2001. It is not a coincidence that the author chooses to let her self-drugged sleeping beauty to wake up in 2001—we readers know that she will witness the day that changed the world—September 11th 2001 soon. Would she prefer to waking up to a different time? After one-year long sleep, she is going to witness a horrifying scene that makes the reality more like a dream.

As *The Financial Times* aptly notes, Moshfegh's novel can be seen as “the boldest literary statement of passive resistance since Herman Melville's scrivener famously declared ‘I would prefer not to.’” However, despite the striking similarities, a more detailed examination of the two characters' expressions of “I would prefer not to” reveals both shared and divergent elements in their passive resistance. The question arises: What is the significance of this philosophy of non-engagement? Is it a coping mechanism, a form of escape, or something more profound—a conscious rejection of the world and its demands?

At first glance, the social status, identity, and circumstances of Bartleby's eponymous character and Moshfegh's unnamed narrator could not be more different. Bartleby is a “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn” (6) scrivener in a lowly office on Wall Street, a man whose only purpose seems to be the mind-numbing task of copying documents. In contrast, the narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a privileged, attractive 26-year-old woman, living in wealth and luxury, with “tall and thin and blond and pretty and young” (Moshfegh 2018: 27) as her defining traits. Bartleby lives in poverty and obscurity, while Moshfegh's narrator is cocooned in comfort and excess. The narratives are also told from different points of view: Melville's story is

framed through the eyes of Bartleby's employer, creating an air of mystery around the character until his tragic end, while Moshfegh's novel is presented as a first-person account, offering intimate insight into the narrator's mind.

Yet despite these differences, both characters share a unique stance toward life. They both live in Manhattan—albeit 150 years apart—and choose to reject the world around them in their own ways. Bartleby's passive resistance is an attempt to disengage from the work of life, while Moshfegh's narrator takes a more extreme approach by isolating herself entirely, seeking solace in "sleep-living" as a form of withdrawal from the pressures of modern existence. Both characters are indifferent to the events and people around them, choosing to ignore the hustle of Wall Street and the superficiality of the Upper East Side. By the end of their respective stories, both characters are imprisoned—Bartleby in a literal jail, and the narrator in a self-imposed "sleeping prison" (Moshfegh 2018: 263), a confinement to her own inaction and numbness.

Justin Taylor observes that Moshfegh's narrator attempts something that Bartleby never truly manages: an elevated, transcendent state of existence. Taylor writes, "The best way to win a rigged game is to refuse to play it, and so the narrator's narcissistic nihilism has the dignity of refusal on a grand scale. It is only her need to be human, to be part of a world—even a vacuous and exploitative world—that keeps her from achieving the full transcendence of a Bartleby. This failure is something we should all be able to empathize with..." (Moshfegh 2018: 247). The narrator's realization that she must lock herself away to avoid "sleep-living" seems to deviate from the true freedom she seeks—a complete detachment from the chaotic demands of social media, technology, and societal expectations. Does her story, then, suggest that doing nothing might be the only way to truly begin living? Or does her passive resistance ultimately fail in its attempt to break free from the world it seeks to escape?

Conclusions

Moshfegh's narrator's journey toward inactivity can also be read as a nod to the ancient philosopher Diogenes, whose rejection of societal norms and materialism was equally radical. Like Diogenes, the narrator's embrace of doing nothing highlights the absurdity of modern life, where the pressure to be constantly busy and productive often overwhelms the desire for quiet reflection. This is reflected in her admiration for Whoopi Goldberg, whom she sees as a hero for her acceptance of life's absurdity. "Whenever she appeared on-screen, I sensed she was laughing at the whole production... Wherever she went,

everything around her became a parody of itself, gauche and ridiculous. That was a comfort to see. Thank God for Whoopi. Nothing was sacred. Whoopi was proof” (Moshfegh 2018: 196). The narrator finds comfort in Goldberg’s ability to exist outside the confines of societal expectation, a comfort that mirrors the way readers of Melville and Moshfegh might also find solace in characters who reject the demands of the world, repeating “I would prefer not to.” This act of refusal, this resistance to participate in the prescribed rhythms of life, becomes a powerful form of defiance—a critique of the forces that demand our constant engagement and productivity, even at the cost of our humanity.

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HUMAN COST OF CLIMATE CHANGE.
A RESPONSE TO THE FILM *KADVI HAWA*

JASMINE ANAND*

ABSTRACT. *Kadvi Hawa* (Dark/Bitter Wind), directed by Nila Madhab Panda, emerges as a significant climate film that poignantly encapsulates the multifaceted impacts of climate change within a fictional narrative. Released in 2017, it marks a rare exploration of emotional dimensions associated with environmental crises in Indian cinema, garnering a Special Mention at the 64th National Film Awards and support from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India. The film's symbolism—representing the once life-giving winds now transformed into harbingers of drought and cyclones—reflects a stark reality of the Anthropocene, where the expected seasonal cycles have been disrupted. This paper interrogates the interplay between dystopian and utopian imaginaries prevalent in cultural discourse, asserting that while narratives of climate catastrophe may reinforce feelings of helplessness, they also provoke critical reflection on human agency and collective action. By engaging with contemporary climate science debates, notably the uncertainties highlighted by scholars like Kathryn Yusoff, this analysis underscores the necessity of confronting fear and hope in the face of environmental degradation. While Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects presents a chilling perspective on humanity's entanglement with global warming, this paper argues for the relevance of cultural narratives that illuminate our present realities and future possibilities. Ultimately, *Kadvi Hawa* serves as a clarion call, urging both the readers and viewers to grapple with the complexities of climate change and our role in shaping the future amidst uncertainty.

KEY WORDS: climate change, farmer suicides, climate films, ecological grief, slow violence

Water has no mouth, but swallows many.
Light has no hands, but touches many.
Wind has no feet, but carries many.
Darkness has no teeth, but devours many.
Matshona Dhliwayo

* JASMINE ANAND (PhD 2019, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India) is Assistant Professor of English, Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh, India. E-mail: jasmine18anand@gmail.com.

Introduction

The cost of climate change is multifarious. The nexus of its various components- the atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere governs the change in earth's climate. The heating and cooling of air creates wind currents that carry water vapour and move heat from one part of the earth to another, water in its various forms is the climate regulator, ice not only sends back the solar radiation but activates water circulation deep down the ocean and its melting brings in change to the sea water level, the texture of the solid land further impacts the affect of wind/water, and the interaction of living plants, animals, and humans on earth further catalyses its local climate. The biosphere in the current scenario, especially, the human induced climate change weighs heavy globally.

Apart from technical and scientific literature the wild and its wilderness along with the anthropocene finds a miniscule of a space in the area of fiction and films based on climate change. After long in India, for the first time, the film *Kadvi Hawa* (Dark/Bitter Wind) directed by Nila Madhab Panda released in 2017 evokes an emotional aspect of climate change. The film received a Special Mention (Special Jury Award) at the 64th National Film Awards in India and is supported by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India. *Kadvi* means dark, bitter, poisonous, sullen, ill; that is, symbolically the wind that used to bring clouds and was responsible for changing seasons has gone amnesiac or rebellious because it's sick resulting into two extreme phenomenas on the land of India- drought and cyclones. A film made so late under the rage of climate change as a 'global construct' and lately the tumultuous affect of climate change in India affirms how the word "Climate change' is a thoroughly un-Indian word" (Dubash 2020: 127). Since 1972 when Indira Gandhi used the dictate of "development before environment' at the United Nations" India has not been sensitive regarding environment and its predicament on the natives of that environment (Nilekani 2008 :430). Hence, the climate policy in India is all about contributions to the world emissions at the global level than led by the local pocket concerns of cyclones, floods, droughts, smogs, and uneven weather cycles. Citizens of India are more focussed on the issues related to pollution and development than the overall impact of climate change. In this regard the Hindi terminology of climate change is clumsy yet facinating to note, "*jal-vaayu parivartan* (water-air changes)" (Dubash 2020 :128).

Cinematic Climate Change

The idea of how man gets wild ethically as well as vulnerable amidst wild fury of nature hit by drought and cyclone respectively is played upon in the film *Kadvi Hawa*. Ironically, the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture; the lack of humane emotions and care for each other. There has been a greater derangement in our doings and also in our response to the catastrophe of our doings; the current paper is a response to such change both inside and outside us in the wake of climate vagary. Climate is largely studied as science but it needs to be studied socially, culturally, psychologically, economically, as well as politically for better policy development and sustainable living. There is surprisingly paucity of studies in literature and cultural studies describing the multifarious impact and the cost attached to climate change. However, the unflinching developments in technology and communication have led to a shift known as “pictorial turn” which manifests itself in a field of inquiry ranging from academics to culture to philosophy to politics (Mitchell 1994: 9). Film as a visual medium of representation and interpretation through the sequencing and juxtaposition of images, and its inherent dialogism advances and tries to establish the issue at hand, further.

The film *Kadvi Hawa* is set up in the ravines and dryland of Chambal where it has not rained for the last 15 years. The film is shot on 16 mm reel that covers the grittiness and texture of arid landscape full of sand mounds and low dusty cliffs that serve the purpose of showing the climate degradation sans water in high temperature which any digital medium would not have captured to its authenticity. 16 mm celluloid allows bare minimum editing and avoids manipulation unlike the digital medium; hence it captures the depth of the landscape as well as the character focussing on human evolution in a documentary style of slow paced drama, as the whole focus is on the story and the character and not the post production tricks. Maintaining the gravity of subject the film has been shot in sombre tones of sepia to show barrenness and aridity of land, and drudgery and struggle of peasants in Bundelkhand region of India.

The film comments on the challenges posed by climate change upon its worst recipients, the poor people, since, they don't have resources to mitigate the risk of climate change. It showcases how a farmer who has no role in global warming is impacted the most as he is at the bottom of the chain. Drought sets off a vicious cycle of socioeconomic impacts beginning with crop-yield failure, unemployment, erosion of assets, decrease in income, worsening of living conditions, poor nutrition, and, subsequently, decreased risk absorptive capacity, and thus increasing vulnerability of the poor to another drought

and other shocks, including suicides and death of their loved ones. The “spectacular violence” of immediate impact that is evident in a cyclonic calamity remains hidden in the “slow violence” and vulnerability of “disposable people” or the “environmentalism of the poor” in a drought prone area with its unspectacular time where ironically everything seems calm (Nixon 2011: 4). Droughts result because of rainfall deficit and/or level of impacts on hydrological cycle and agro-ecosystems, thus, can be meteorological, hydrological, or agricultural drought. As per the National Drought Manual, 2009:

About 68% of the net sown area of India is prone to drought. Three hundred and twenty nine million hectare of land covering 103 districts and 16 states of India are chronically drought prone. (Gupta 2014: i)

Strangely, the lack and excess of water marks the prologue and epilogue of the film. It is a catch-22 situation for Gunnu Babu (Ranveer Shorey), a debt recovery agent in a bank who is a climate refugee to a town Dholpur near village Mahua (Chambal) who loses his whole family in the Odisha cyclone, unable to bring them to a safe haven, that is, Chambal. In the film Gunnu’s safe haven Chambal becomes a death trap for Mukund, a farmer (Bhupesh Singh) and many others who are unable to payback their loans because of drought and crop failure. The irony in the film is projected through escape from climate change of the characters who are trying to find safe abodes for their loved ones. For Heddu (Sanjay Mishra), Odisha is a dreamland where there is water every where, good enough for drinking and cultivation, and Gunnu finds Bundelkhand as the paradise since there is no water, and thus no danger of a cyclone eroding his family and property.

Gunnu is the victim at the hands of climate change in Odisha and at the same time perpetrator of victimization leading to farmer suicides as he recovers the loan amount forcefully out of the farmers leading to lucrative double commission for recovery in village Mahua, the village of Heddu. He is called as a *yamdoot*, God of death, the powerful one; yet he himself is a vulnerable climate refugee both escaping to save himself and looking for a better and safe life for his family in Bundelkhand from Odisha. Gunnu’s character perpetrates “structural injustice” in the lives of many farmers. Structural injustice as defined by Young is a situation in which “some people’s options are unfairly constrained and they are threatened with deprivation, while others derive significant benefits. ... [it] is a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the repressive policies of a state. ... most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms” (Young 2011 :52). Gunnu

Babu who is the perpetrator himself becomes the prey at the hands of climate fury. United Nations estimates that there will be a million climate refugees or more by 2050 as sea levels rise and places become drier. It was examined that the “greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration—with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and agricultural disruption” (Brown 2008: 9). Further, the report gives a dismal picture of climate extremity that:

By 2099 the world is expected to be on average between 1.8°C and 4°C hotter than it is now. Large areas are expected to become drier—the proportion of land in constant drought expected to increase from 2 per cent to 10 per cent by 2050... Rainfall patterns will change as the hydrological cycle becomes more intense. In some places this means that rain will be more likely to fall in deluges (washing away top-soil and causing flooding). (Brown 2008: 16)

As mentioned, contrary to rapid onset disasters like cyclones, droughts normally lack highly visible impacts; instead, their impacts are generally non-structural and spread over long periods and large areas essentially in terms of economy as well as demography. *Kadvi Hawa* portrays how the human and social costs of drought have been and remain devastating for many in the Chambal region of Bundelkhand, and juxtaposingly also due to cyclone in Odisha. In the Nixonian sense it is a “slow violence... that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011: 2). The cyclonic violence is immediate, eruptive, and spectacular unlike the slow violence of drought.

Ecological grief and physical-emotional loss marks the lands of Vidarbha and Bundelkhand in India where maximum farmer suicides happen due to unemployment and lack of agriculture because of no rainfall and no artificial irrigation method. In the film Mukund’s and other villager’s suicides are result of ecological grief. Ashlee Cunsolo in an interview said, “Ecological grief is the grief, pain, sadness or suffering that people identify as experiencing when they lose a beloved ecosystem, species or place” (The World Staff 2019). In a research “Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss”, both Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis (2018: 276) further divide ecological grief into three contexts: “grief associated with physical ecological losses (land, ecosystems and species), grief associated with disruptions to environmental knowledge and loss of identity, and grief associated with anticipated future ecological losses.” With this kind of a research it is important to

have an insight as to how climate change is enmeshed in our everyday living that engages responses on emotional level and other levels.

Climate related emotional costs can be linked to sadness, despair, helplessness, hopelessness, fear, frustration, stress, depression, ideas of suicides, attempts of suicide, human cost in form of death by suicides, and identity crisis/attachment crisis to loss of place, culture, or knowledge. Ecological grief has either an acute immediate impact or a slow impact as seen in terms of the character of Gunnu (when cyclone strikes his family in Odisha) and Hedu (the slow and creeping changes in climate of Mahua and the ensuing farmer suicides). Hedu is a blind yet poignant character suffering thoroughly “seeing shifts in environments and ecosystems over months, years or decades and feeling that ongoing sense of pain and suffering of watching a beloved place change” (The World Staff 2019). His grief is isolating and debilitating at the same time leading to the loss of many lives around him and by the end of the film his own son’s death in the name of farmer’s suicide due to climate change. The mourning begins from the first frame of the film through Hedu’s steps of anxiety traversing through the Bundelkhand ravines randomly meanwhile examining and “working-through” for his future generations, especially his son Mukund. *Kadvi Hawa* addresses how the psychological aspects of climate change are more important than ever as we trudge into a rapidly changing environmental climate.

In a study conducted in India by Leiserowitz et al. (2013) “Global Warnings’s Six Indias”, it was examined that there are six distinct groups (“Informed”, “Experienced”, “Undecided”, “Concerned”, “Indifferent”, and the “Disengaged”) within the public of India with their varied responses to global warming. It mentions that

The Informed (19 per cent) are the most aware and convinced of the reality and danger of climate change and highly supportive of national actions to mitigate the threat. The Experienced (24 per cent) - the largest of the Six Indias - know less about climate change, but are convinced that it is happening and a serious problem, in part because they say they have personally experienced the impacts more than any other group. Three other Indias—the Undecided (15 per cent), the Unconcerned (15 per cent) and the Indifferent (11 per cent)—represent different stages of understanding and acceptance of the problem. The final India - the Disengaged (16 per cent) - have never heard of climate change and have no opinion about it, even when it is described. (6)

Climate Change and Rural Depression

The study on the response of six types of Indians to global warming claims that the literate urban elite have more knowledge about climate change than

the people residing in rural areas. As obvious the “Disengaged Indians” said that they were not aware of the cause of global warming and comprised mostly of “rural and female” respondents (Leiserowitz et al. 2013: 9). Interestingly, *Kadvi Hawa* portrays Heddu, an old blind peasant who is differently-abled but not blind to the changing apocalyptic scenario around him. He gets the audience to see the reality when he uses the leitmotif of *hawa* (wind). Reminiscing the time goneby he revels in the thought of the wind and says “*yahan par bhi [charaon] mausam haut the ... hawa hai to badal aat hai, hawa hai to sardi garmi sab aat hai; hamare zamane me, chaar alag alag dishaon se khushboo leke aat thi wo, ab najane kya hogaya hai usko, jaise bimaar ho gayi ho*” which means there was a time when Mahua, the village had four seasons; because of wind the clouds travel, wind is the reason of season change – coming of summer and winter; in the past from the four directions the wind carried the scent of the earth and was moisture laden due to rainfall; now something has happened to the wind as if she has fallen ill. The dialogue signifies nostalgia and in an elegiac tone the loss of a sense of self, as there is no more the presence of four seasons as well as rainfall and the aroa of wet soil along with the resulting greenery and the crop cultivation with which Heddu associated himself. Wind seems to be a central character who has been personified too; ruling the life of all the characters in the film. The dialogue shows how the nature and the peasant are closely connected and a peasant might be illiterate or unaware about the definition of global warming but he can read the weather and its change better than any modern literate millenial obsessed with his/her gadgets/vehicles increasing the carbon footprint.



Image 1 ¹

1 Image 1 was taken from <https://www.rediff.com/movies/review/review-rage-turns-into-beauty-in-kadvi-hawa/20171124.htm>.

Film *Kadvi Hawa* opens with Heddu crossing the ravines of Chambal. The mise-en-scene of barren ravines and Heddu's rawness and aimless wandering are layered on each other to show the hopelessness, struggle, dryness of the environment around. The tinge of his clothes and demeanour is one with the dusty chromeness of the land around. With the non-digetic solemn music one hears the sound of wind. It is followed by a bus travel to Dholpur where one hears bus chatter consisting of fragmentary dialogues like "bad odour" and "increase in temperature". The next frame introduces Gunnu, the debt recovery agent in the bank who asks Heddu, "Which Mahua are you from... the *nadi* (river) one or *bihad* (wasteland or dessert) one?" to which Heddu replies "*bi-had*".

To all the questions that Heddu's granddaughter Kuhu asks him, he replies to them as "hawa" (wind). She goes to school where the conversation between the teacher and students in the geography class is noteworthy about studying environment; the teacher recites in chorus along with the students, "*mausam ka chakr chalta hai, wo chalta hi rehta hai, kabhi rukta nahi hai*" (seasons are cyclical, they come and go throughout the year). The intellectual irony of climate change soon turns into a farce in a peculiar dialogue between the teacher and the student:

Teacher: How many seasons are there in a year?

All Students: Four.

One Student: Two.

Teacher: Who is the one, who said two? Are you coming from Antarctica?

Student: No sir, Mahua.

Teacher: Why have you mentioned two seasons ... which ones are they?

Student: Sir, one of summer another of winter.

Teacher: You missed out the rainy season!

Student: But it doesn't rain here, just showers for 2-4 days in a year... at times in summers, other times in winters.

To this all the students laugh and the teacher frowns and scolds the student who said there are only two seasons in a year. The scene goads us to laughter at the innocent reason of the student; but the dark comedy is inlaid with a dig at our own situation because of which the four seasons have dropped down to two. The seriousness of climate change further develops in a scene in which a news reporter on TV informs how lentils will be imported by India now to

meet the demand and supply because of crop failure that was consequent to erratic monsoons.

The ecological grief purges out in the dialogues of Hedu with his buffalo named Annapurna, he tells her that Mukund has got some employment in town and how the intermittent work will keep the mind of his son cool, away from the ruinous thoughts. The scene when Hedu and Mukund refuse to eat food under the stress of loan, family responsibility and suicides all around them can be well studied as representative of pre-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the total fatalist Indian sense, Hedu comments that when a child was born in their house rather than destiny line, the child carried the loan line in its hands. The slow payback of the loan and the wretched life was subsequently shared by Hedu's father, Hedu, and now his son. This slow pressure of debt, that is, the "slow violence" present in the drought prone area of India is quite heavy on the farmers and their families. In another frame, Hedu opines that the wind is quite arid to which Gunnu replies that the wind will bring rainfall the next year, and he should not worry. Earlier there used to be crop yield twice a year, now the land is barren and arid without crop produce, employment, and with an additional burden of loans on farmers. Hedu confesses that he is afraid that by then this disease (farmer suicide) may not eat his son. It can be seen how the suicides are not just attritional but their impact has been exponential in the villages of India; the suicide threat has multiplied to an extent that sustainable living in a drought prone area is degrading and difficult. Gunnu who is from Odisha tells Hedu that he has both suffered and given hard times to people in life. Knowing Gunnu is from Odisha, Hedu says that there is water all around and he has heard that there is a pond attached to every house there. He adds, "The wind has been very kind to you." "A bit too kind," Gunnu replies wistfully, recalling the deadly impact of frequent cyclones that ravage the coastal state. His home in Odisha was claimed by sea in due to climate change. His father died of grief and his mother still searches for the home and her husband under sea. His family is still in danger. He wishes and tries to bring his family to Bundelkhand before the rainfall in Odisha so that they can be safe here. One craves rain, and the other fears it and they help each other. The poster images (see image 2 and 3) of the film show the oxymoronic impact of water on earth along with the visceral emotions of the two characters.



(Image 2)² (Image 3)³

The subtle and political angle of human cost is well addressed through manipulation and maneuvering of Heddu. Heddu, the blind peasant in order to save his son from the clutches of *yamdoot*, Gunnu the debt recovery agent, gets into a Faustian bargain with him; the effects of which are far-reaching. Everyone knows in the village how the presence of Gunnu in their village is a precursor to farmer suicides. The pact between Heddu and Gunnu is based on love for family and their safety; the driven cost of which ultimately is unnerving and overwhelming. Heddu promises to give Gunnu clues about 34 villagers from Mahua and 50 of the surrounding area who can payback loan so that the amount of Mukund, his son shall be deferred. For Heddu, Gunnu is like rain; without the knowledge that this rain God may bring cyclone to his life with the eventual missing of his son surmounting to suicide. Where the drought has dried up the soil, there it leads to soiling up of human morals in dust. Just before Mukund's missing, Heddu informs Gunnu about a recovery from a peasant whose sister's marriage breaks because the collection of dowry for her is forcefully taken as recovery by Gunnu. The film represents how human emotions take over the inhuman realities of climate change. In a later frame, Gunnu's comment to Mukund blows his self-esteem; "*aam ka paisa hai bank ka paisa dene ke liye nahi hai, agar jab dena nahi hai to leta kyu ho, bank karja diya hai tumko daan thodi diya hai ... pet faad ke nikalunga ek ek paisa ... sharam aa rahi hai to kamse kam biyaaj to chukta karo*" (you have money to eat mango but not to return that to the bank, if you cannot payback why do you take the loan, bank has given you loan and not charity... I will take the money

² Image 2 taken from <https://www.nowrunning.com/movie/21930/bollywood.hindi/kadvi-hawa/>.

³ Image 3 taken from <https://www.comingtrailer.com/movieposter/hindi/934639399/Kadvi-Hawa>.

out of you by hook or crook... if you are feeling embarrassed atleast pay back your interest). He threatens Mukund that wherever he goes for collection, he never leaves empty handed. When Mukund mentions that he would pay an amount on the 2nd, Gunnu without listening to the following phrase as “next month” tells him that the next day was 2nd and he should pay back the amount the very next day and ignores listening to him.

The entire debacle of climate change in the film is aptly put by the lyricist Mukta Bhatt in a song “*mai banjar*” (I’m barren) sung by Mohan Kannan. It showcases impotency and infertility of land resulting into barrenness of human values and burden of living. String instruments and their snapping along with percussion intensifies the tragedy of climate change and heightens the chasm of horrid reality. A poem by Gulzar “*banjaare lagte hain mausam*” (seasons look like nomads) for the film accentuates the thematic concern. It weaves in its narration the doings of humans (deforestation, building dams, urban development, natural wetland destruction, agricultural activities, irresponsible mining, and frackling for oil and natural gas) and how they have enslaved and bonded the earth, and turned the seasons into nomads who have no home to come to and rest as they used to. The film embroils together the fate of Hedu and Gunnu. Hedu has land but no water, Gunnu loses his land to the water of the sea cyclone. Finally, the film ends with Hedu losing his son to suicide and Gunnu receiving the news of hitting of 6B cyclone in Odisha indicating the loss of his family in it. Juxtaposing two characters, two different geographies, communities and lives affected by changing winds and global warming, Nila Madhab Panda simply asks us to open our eyes and face a bitter truth before its impact is irreversible. The film is a revelatory experience and not a redemptive one. It brings out the environmental crisis by bringing it close to everyday life and exposing the human cost of it- the cost of death, culture, and morals.

To conclude, for some of us the impact of climate change is yet to be felt, whereas, for others it is part of daily life. When the climate change becomes a ‘slice of life’ its cost becomes material, social, psychological, cultural, economic as well as political. *Kadvi Hawa* is a complete metaphor of “a perfect moral storm” where devastated by the climate challenge the costs intermingle with and drown the moral obligation to humanity. It also focusses on the predicament of ecocides and climate refugees. The film as a visual medium aids in understanding the climate problem as concrete social, political, and ethical issue, than, as abstract in terms of numbers, calculations, abstractions of economy and science. Humanizing climate change by addressing its psychological dimensions is important step in learning to address the issue of climate

change as individuals in a global community. Thus, in a climate study; ethical issues, slow violence, structural injustice, and ecological grief are some of the important factors to be focussed upon while developing action plans involving education, mitigation, adaptation, prevention, relocation locally as well as globally (Dryzek et al.). These nuances need to be the focus of environmental rights and development rights to call on climate justice all around.

Conclusions

The film *Kadvi Hawa* as a response to slow environmental degradation and human cost brings up a perspective and takes bold position on the past and ongoing wrong-doings of humans in relation to the environment and towards each other on the moral plane amidst the violence of climate instability. Thus, as a means of awareness the film is a medium of creating prosthetic memory, “an experience through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history... takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live” (Landsberg 2004: 2). This kind of a film shakes one who is distanced from the ground reality and the tragedy of living in another part of the world into awareness of what some of our less fortunate brethren are going through. To connect with people and start a healthy dialogue on ethics and conservation, the scientists and environmentalists need to appeal to the emotions and the experience of shared psychological stress of public at large through the fictional gaze of the doom that hangs on all of us. In the critical framework proposed by Kathryn Yusoff (2013: 164), films like *Kadvi Hawa* serve as a conduit for exploring the myriad uncertainties that plague our understanding of climate change, particularly what remains unknowable or elusive (2009). This discourse finds a compelling counterpoint in Timothy Morton’s assertion: “what has happened so far during the epoch of the Anthropocene has been the gradual realization by humans that they are not running the show, at the very moment of their most powerful technical mastery on a planetary scale.”

The portrayal of water—or its conspicuous absence—in the film resonates profoundly with Morton’s concept of hyperobjects, which encapsulates the nonhuman forces that envelop us, often beyond our conscious recognition. These hyperobjects exert a profound influence on our existence, revealing their overpowering nature once we become aware of their presence. In this light, *Kadvi Hawa* not only reflects the existential challenges posed by climate change but also invites us to confront the intricate interplay between human agency and the overwhelming forces of the environment. Hence, films on cli-

mate change become an important vehicle of shaping public “subjectivity and politics” (Landsberg 2004: 2) which is elemental and beneficial in understanding global warming and its concerns, and might construct “the grounds for unexpected alliances across chasms of [human] difference” (Landsberg 2004: 3) providing some ethical thinking and human connections along with strategies of political engagement [motivating human action/agency] for the present and the future of humankind.

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UNDE FUGIM DE-ACASĂ?
THE PLAYFUL WORLD OF MARIN SORESCU FOR
YOUNG READERS

DOREL-AUREL MUREȘAN*

ABSTRACT. This paper examines Marin Sorescu's unique approach to children's literature, specifically focusing on his celebrated work *Unde fugim de-acasă?* Published in 1967, this volume invites young readers on a fantastical journey that transcends genre boundaries, blending elements of poetry, theater, and storytelling. Sorescu's skillful use of humor, irony, and playful language constructs a vivid world where children explore themes of imagination, curiosity, and the desire to break free from the familiar. Through protagonists Mirela and Radu, readers are taken on whimsical adventures that emphasize learning through imagination rather than mere didacticism. This analysis highlights how Sorescu's techniques, such as intertextuality, parody, and metaphor, engage readers of all ages by connecting them to cultural narratives while nurturing empathy and moral development. In blending reality with fantasy, Sorescu offers readers both young and old a space to experience a complex, poetic escape from ordinary life, showcasing the transformative potential of children's literature.

KEY WORDS: Marin Sorescu, children's literature, Romanian literature, intertextuality, parody, genre blending

Introducere

Fiul lui Ștefan Sorescu și al Nicoliței (născută Ionescu), Marin Sorescu s-a născut la 29 februarie 1936 în Bulzești, satul părinților săi din județul Dolj. A făcut școala primară în satul natal, după care a trecut la Colegiul Național „Frații Buzzești” din Craiova, continuându-și studiile în Predeal, la Școala medie militară. În perioada 1955-1960, Sorescu a studiat la Facultatea de Filologie a Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași, obținând licența în limbi moderne. După absolvirea facultății a fost repartizat ca redactor la re-

* DOREL-AUREL MUREȘAN (PhD 2016, West University, Timișoara) is Lecturer in English and American Literature at Emanuel University of Oradea. E-mail: aurel.muresan@emanuel.ro.

vista „Viața studentească”, în care avusese debutul liric în 1959, iar din 1963 se transferă ca redactor la revista „Luceafărul”. În 1964, la vârsta de 28 de ani, îi apare prima carte, anume volumul de parodii *Singur printre poeți*, iar în anul următor volumul *Poeme*, pentru care primește în 1966 Premiul Uniunii Scriitorilor. Sorescu va mai primi acest premiu de câteva ori pe parcursul carierei sale, pentru volumul I din *La Liliaci* (1973), pentru volumele de teatru *Iona* (1968), *Setea muntelui de sare* (1974) și *A treia țeapă* (1978), iar până la moartea sa din 1996 îi vor apărea încă 23 de volume, devenind o figură marcantă a literaturii române contemporane. Totodată, Sorescu a fost membru al *Programului Internațional pentru Scriitori* al Universității din Iowa, iar în 1992 și-a susținut doctoratul în filologie la Universitatea din București, cu teza „Insolitul ca energie creatoare, cu exemple din literatura română”.

De-a lungul timpului, Marin Sorescu lucrează și la alte reviste, printre care revista craioveană „Ramuri”. Într-un articol din Revista *Cultura*, Alex Ștefănescu relatează că, după ce activase ca redactor-șef la numita revistă între 1978-1990, Sorescu a fost forțat să se retragă în 1992, în urma unei scrisori semnate de mai mulți redactori ai publicației. Deși nu s-a înscris într-un partid politic, după Revoluția din 1989 a ocupat funcția de Ministru al Culturii în cabinetul lui Nicolae Văcăroiu (25 nov. 1993-5 mai 1995), „rol care nu i se potrivea”, și astfel „le-a oferit adversarilor pretexte plauzibile pentru a-l denigra” (Ștefănescu 2020). Totuși, criticul concluzionează că adevăratul motiv pentru care Sorescu a întâmpinat opoziție a fost invidia față de talentul său inegalabil: „Cauza reală a ostilității care i s-a arătat a fost însă cu totul alta, și anume invidia sumbră, viscerală față de talentul și inteligența sa, față de dezinvoltura, mozartiană, cu care crea în genuri diferite și cucerea publicul, față de clasicizarea aproape instantanee a textelor scrise de el” (Ștefănescu 2020).

Interesul lui Sorescu pentru literatură și artă se dovedește foarte cuprinzător, dat fiind că nu se rezumă la a scrie într-un anumit gen literar. Dimpotrivă, autorul produce poezie, proză (roman), teatru, eseistică, critică literară, traduceri – versuri de Boris Pasternak – literatură pentru copii, însă se face remarcat și prin preocuparea pentru pictură, deschizând numeroase expoziții de artă în țară și în străinătate și realizând totodată pictură naivă, în special în ultima parte a vieții. Vorbind despre această ultima perioadă, Evelina Cîrciu îl descrie pe Sorescu astfel:

Creator tenace, profund dedicat artei sale, Marin Sorescu nu renunță la scris nici pe patul de moarte. Ultimele sale poezii, strânse în volumul „Puntea”, sunt dictate soției și vor constitui, prin simplitatea și mesajul lor grav, un adevărat testament literar. Opera lui va marca și va influența însă, după cum observa și Mircea Scarlat, sensibi-

litatea generațiilor viitoare, atât prin expresie, cât și prin zonele ei profunde. (Cîrciu, f.a.: 9)

Aceeași Evelina Cîrciu punctează existența unor elemente lirice constante în opera lui Sorescu, ce susțin originalitatea acestuia:

În fiecare volum de versuri, în pofida tendinței poetului de a abandona redevutele deja cucerite și de a-și primeni și înnoi consecvent formula lirică, pot fi descoperite câteva elemente constante, care sunt totodată și argumente în favoarea originalității celui care se declara de la început *singur printre poeți*. Depoetizarea, prozaismul, discursivitatea, discreția stilistică și simplitatea necontrafăcută, scenariul comic al poemelor, complicitatea cu cititorul alcătuiesc prima față a acestui lirism și explică popularitatea operei soresciene. În același timp, ironizarea marilor teme și simboluri literare (iubirea, moartea, trecerea timpului), ludicul și întrebuițarea tuturor nuanțelor umorului dovedesc o inteligență artistică atent exersată și scot în evidență celălalt profil al autorului. Prin toate aceste caracteristici care leagă cărțile între ele, poezia lui Marin Sorescu și-a câștigat un ton aproape inconfundabil. (Cîrciu f.a.: 9)

Unde Fugim De-acasă? Sorescu, Ludicul și Literatura pentru Copii
Marin Sorescu își încearcă talentul ludic nu doar în poezie, teatru, romane, eseuri, și fabule, ci și în literatura pentru copii, cu *Unde fugim de-acasă?* – 1967, *Cocostârcul Gât-Sucit* – 1987, *Ocolul infinitului mic, pornind de la nimic* – 1973, și *Cirip-Ciorap* – 1993. Volumul *Unde fugim de acasă? (Aproape teatru, aproape poeme, aproape povești)* surprinde cititorul încă din titlul absolut sugestiv, la care se referă și Olga Morar în articolul său „Literatura pentru copii - o literatură specială“:

Să nu-l uităm pe Marin Sorescu și mirifica sa lume a copilăriei din volumul *Unde fugim de-acasă? (Aproape teatru, aproape poeme, aproape povești)*, un titlu al literaturii pentru copii care desființează granițele dintre genuri și specii, sugerându-ne o lecție de modernitate ce trebuie înțeleasă în adevăratul sens al cuvântului, trecând dincolo de literatură în viața noastră personală, căci mereu „fugim de acasă“. Cel mai important lucru ar fi să învățăm „să fugim“ prin intermediul visului propus de literatură, insufându-le celor mici ideea că în acest mod putem pleca aproape oriunde. (Morar 2009)

Așadar, cartea lui Marin Sorescu este o invitație în călătoria imaginației, oferind aproape orice tip de experiență cititorului, de la aventură, explorare și suspans, toate acestea văzute prin ochii unui copil într-o perioadă sau într-un

moment când „acasă” poate semnifica rutină, plictiseală, reguli, îndatoriri și poate chiar teme de casă.

Pe de altă parte, ideea călătoriei, a explorării, la care suntem invitați în *Unde fugim de-acasă?* poate fi interpretată și ca sete de cunoaștere specifică vârstelor fragede, perioadă în care dorința de nou, de înțelegere a lumii înconjurătoare ne poate face să tânjim să depășim granițele cunoscutului, ale familiarului, și să explorăm lumea mare. Marin Sorescu ne poartă, astfel, împreună cu Mirela și Radu, cei doi copii ai săi, într-o călătorie imaginară, fantastică și bineînțeles imposibilă din punct de vedere omenesc, în jurul lumii. Demn de menționat este că Sorescu rămâne genialul poet și în “narațiunea” *Unde fugim de-acasă?*, care, dacă este citită cu intonație și ritm, dovedește prezența unei rime interioare. Acest lirism al povestirilor oferă un farmec aparte operei mai ales dacă este citită cu voce tare, păstrând o oarecare oralitate a textului. Ceea ce face această călătorie imaginară spectaculoasă nu sunt doar evenimentele fantastice, supranaturale – dat fiind că ea este o îmbinare de activități banale și de aventuri fantastice – ci în special descrierile pline de vioiciune, de mișcare, de culoare, ci și suprapunerea neașteptată de elemente ludice și serioase, rigide. O astfel de juxtapunere a ludicului cu realul se regăsește în comparația din povestirea *La Grădina Zoologică*, în care cușca și bunica sunt asemănațe:

Grădina zoologică e un fel de magazin de jucării, unde tigrii, girafele și leoparzii sunt vii. Rogi lupul să te ia puțin în cârcă, și când colo te mănâncă. Hei, ca pe Scufița Roșie te-ar mânca, cușca dacă l-ar lăsa. Dar, vedeți, aceste cuști de fier, sau colivii, sunt ca niște bunicuțe ale lor: au grijă să nu facă prostii. (Sorescu 1966: 9)

Se pot observa nuanțele în care copilul învață importanța regulilor prin imaginea bunicii, care oferă siguranță doar între anumite limite. De asemenea, i se sugerează copilului că regulile sunt dovezi ale iubirii unuia dintre cei mai calzi oameni din familie – bunica – întruchiparea blândeții și a bunătății.

Marin Sorescu nu insinuează că cititorii săi trebuie să-și abandoneze casa, părinții, camera și jucăriile fugind de-acasă, ci doar că învățarea necesită depășirea cunoscutului. Cititorul este așadar transportat prin fiecare povestire, prin fiecare propoziție și fiecare rimă într-o explorare a lumii receptate prin ochi de copil, un copil ce desenează pe asfalt, merge pe lună, joacă fotbal, se duce la zoo, dar și la cei doi poli, aflând în cele din urmă cum se vede lumea și prin ochii bunicilor. Totuși, Crenguța Gânscă subliniază că ludicul din acest volum nu este neintenționat; dimpotrivă, Sorescu încearcă să înțeleagă realitatea lumii copilului prin răsturnarea realității, păstrând conștiința adultului de-a lungul întregii opere: „Marin Sorescu intră în sufletul copilului pentru

a-l înțelege, nu pentru a-l imita. Aici el rămâne încă adult, însă unul care știe mai multe despre copii decât toți ceilalți“ (Gânscă 2002: 31-2).

Cartea este împărțită în 29 de capitole, fiecare oferind câte o staționare în călătoria prin care este purtat cititorul și avându-și incipitul unde este și firesc: în imaginația copilului care vorbește cu soarele și-l roagă să-i creeze cadrul pentru a se descoperi:

Dă-ne, soare, zilnic papucul tău cald, să putem ieși pe asfalt. Că atunci când nu trec mașini, noi desenăm pe el găini. Găini măiestre, ale căror ouă nu se șterg când plouă. Ba, din contră, din ele, clocite bine, ies copaci, veruțe și albine în fiecare zi, pe un kilometru de trotuar stricăm un kilogram de var. Începem cu portrete de mâțe și alte animale, până ajungem la triunghiuri și linii goale. Facem fel de fel de cercuri și pătrățele și nu mai lăsăm nici o figură să intre în ele. Le păzim o zi-ntreagă, ca nimeni să nu le-nțealegă. În noi în fiecare sforăie netrezit un pictor foarte mare. Unul, nedescoperit până acum niciodată, ca o ciupercă nerăsărită și nemâncată. Și de-aia toată ziua, în genunchi, pe asfalt, lucrăm, pentru că vrem să-l lansăm.

Dar de-o fi pictor sau ba, noi om desena și așa. Chiar dacă ursul nostru n-are decât o labă, se vede că e un urs de treabă.

Deși suntem copii, operele noastre sunt pline de economii. Iată, pentru atâția oameni desenați aici cu creta, vede același ochi de soare, care face naveta. Azi la mine, mâine la tine. Astăzi se uită cu el iepurele care mustăcește fericit și dă din urechi, mâine aceste frunze de stejar, perechi. (Sorescu 1966: 5-6)

Imaginarul și imposibilul se întâlnesc în razele soarelui cunoștințelor, în lumina cărora copilul se poate descoperi, poate porni în călătoria propriei descoperiri, dar și a lumii, începând cu banalul vieții de la țară expus prin prezența obișnuitelor găini, trecând prin cunoștințe de bază la matematică, evidențiate de figurile geometrice, și îndreptându-se spre problemele oamenilor mari, precum realitatea lipsurilor materiale. Eroarea stă la baza învățării, așa cum o ilustrează ursul cu o singură labă, însă este evident că însușirile morale cântăresc mai greu decât cunoștințele teoretice, sugerându-se că orice călătorie inițiată trebuie să aibă ca scop primordial dezvoltarea caracterului. Putem subînțelege că până și educația formală este lipsită de ecou în viața copilului, dacă nu devine un copil “de treabă”.

O altă oprire, la mare, aduce împreună generații de copii, părinți și bunici, pentru a se sublinia trecerea de la jocul copilăriei la responsabilitățile adulților și la întoarcere la mintea copiilor a bunicii, care „s-au făcut mici“. Comentariile și întrebările adulților, „Ce faci?“, „Unde te duci?“, îi opresc pe copii din jocul lor cu nisipul și scoicile, sugerând atât incapacitatea adulților

de a se relaxa, de a se detașa de griji și îndatoriri, cât și responsabilitatea de a-i veghea pe cei mici, intenție care aparent extrage copilul din imersiunea în imaginar, pentru a-l confrunta cu realitatea posibilelor pericole. Deși naratorul se descrie ca nefiind cicălit, asemeni părinților, totuși sfătuiește utilizând lumea înconjurătoare, mediul de joacă al copilului, pentru a oferi o experiență de învățare prin observație: „Dar să știți, copiii: ce e prea mult strică în viață, cum scrie și pe borcanul de dulceață. Deci să nu-mi stați toată ziua în soare, că n-aveți șapte piei pe spinare. Ci să vă uitați cum fac plajă valurile, care aleargă iute și se întorc pe partea cealaltă după două minute“ (Sorescu 1966: 19).

După bucuria de a fi la mare, muntele este următoarea oprire, unde Sorescu se joacă cu limbajul nu doar prin inspirata utilizare a cuvintelor polisemantice și a expresiilor specifice poveștilor populare, ci și prin prezența onomatopoeiei, oferind cititorului un text ce abundă în teme specifice povestirilor, dar și într-o oralitate autentică. Discutând eferescența limbajului sorescian în *Unde fugim de acasă?*, dar și modul în care autorul produce un text îndrăgit de copii și adulți deopotrivă, Simona Laurian afirmă:

Soluția la care recurge în redactarea textelor pentru copii este una simplă, dar ingeni-oasă: surprizele lingvistice (cuvintele polisemantice, sensurile conotative, recurența unor cuvinte, utilizarea unor cuvinte cheie, titluri care sugerează tema, dominantă afectivă) și cele stilistice (prin prezența unor imagini artistice neconvenționale) se țin lanț la fiecare pas. (Laurian 2010: 305)

Așa cum am observat, frumusețea acestui text pentru copii izvorăște și din capacitatea autorului de a îmbina opusuri precum realul și imaginarul, copilăria și maturitatea, realitatea banală și ficțiunea fantastică. Se observă la Marin Sorescu îmbinarea limbajului specific operei sale cu clișee lingvistice comune oricărui cititor: găsim în text animale domestice sau “civilizate”, o vacă descrisă ca “animal folositor” și cu “suflet bun”, iar marea, prezentată ca “apă folositoare” și personificată, „fulgeră și tună” când „are un necaz în familie“. Aceste asociații inedite întâlnite pe tot parcursul textului, dar și în unele titluri, oferă textului valoare metaforică, și totuși uneori brutal de realistă pentru cei înzestrați cu capacitate de interpretare.

Un astfel de exemplu este și povestirea *Calul fermecat, dar nefermecat bine*, în care asociațiile sunt prezente încă din titlu:

Acum, fiindcă pe Zâna Zânelor tot n-am găsit-o, putem porni mai departe. Eu am și pornit-o. Zmeul care-a furat-o din greșeală, crezând că e cine știe ce procopseală, văzându-ne c-am plecat pe urmele lui cu dreptul, s-a retras tot mai în adâncul poveștii.

Deșteptul. Dar oriunde s-o ascunde, oriunde-o fi, tot l-om dibui! Că om fi mici, dar (oricine poate să observe) noi suntem cei doisprezece pitici (în frunte, bineînțeles, cele două rezerve). (Sorescu, 1966: 21)

Realitatea se îmbină cu imaginarul nu doar în ideea călătoriei, ci și prin inserția copilului în poveste. Amestecul poveștii *Albă ca zăpada și cei șapte pitici* cu realitatea călătoriei celor mici trezește interesul micului cititor și-i stârnește imaginația. Povestea are un mesaj și pentru cei mari, prin comparația somnului broaștei țestoase, care doarme nepăsătoare de puilul ei nemângâiat, cu concediul părinților, transmițând astfel un mesaj adultului care citește împreună cu copilul. În plus, finalul poveștii se lasă cu o bătătură la picior, o așa-zisă durere, dar imediat se face trecerea la imaginar, prin comparația unei pietre în pantof cu un munte, sugerând cât de intens poate fi percepută o durere de picior atât de cei mici, cât și de cei mari.

Povestirea *Unu și celelalte numere* învață micul cititor că matematica nu este atât de grea, de obositoare precum spun frecvent și copiii, și părinții. Adormind în timp ce numără până la doi, copiii îl învață pe trei în vis, iar apoi, de-a lungul povestirii, sunt conștientizați că sunt înconjurați de numere. Matematica încetează să fie o materie ruptă de realitatea cotidiană, devenind parte din viața de fiecare zi, din tot ce-i înconjoară. Concluzia este simplă: învățatul nu se rezumă la timpul petrecut în sala de clasă, într-un context formal, ci este posibil și recomandat în orice moment al zilei: „De-aia zic: învățați numărătoarea pe degete, pe frați, pe clanțele ușii, pe dinți, să-i puteți ajuta pe bunici, pe părinți. Seara, când vi se face patul, să vă gândiți: unde am ajuns cu număratul? Și să adormiți“ (Sorescu, 1966: 26). Important este, de asemenea, ca micul elev să mediteze la ceea ce învață, să facă un inventar al lucrurilor experimentate, să-și dezvolte abilitatea de autocunoaștere, iar acesta să fie un exercițiu zilnic înainte de culcare.

Textul este bogat în intertextualitate, Sorescu producând o capodoperă a literaturii pentru copii prin îmbinarea creativă a personajelor fantastice cu cele din povești relativ comune, având teme, idei și motive care, evident, nu sunt noi. În plus, Marin Sorescu reușește să folosească tehnica aluziei prin capacitatea de a valorifica resursele lingvistice, și astfel evită să ofere răspunsuri directe, însă invită la cunoașterea bazată pe emoție, fantezie și intuiție. Vorbind despre tehnica aluziei la Marin Sorescu, Alex Ștefănescu arată că

toată poezia lui Marin Sorescu și, de altfel, aproape tot ceea ce a scris poetul se bazează pe această tehnică a aluziei, folosită, desigur, în numeroase variante, dar menținându-se aproape întotdeauna la nivelul posibilităților intelectuale ale unui om de

cultură medie, ceea ce îi asigură o largă audiență. Varianta cea mai bogat reprezentată o constituie mitizarea unor momente din viața obișnuită. Subliniem: mitizarea și nu demitizarea, cum s-a spus de atâtea ori. Tehnica aluziei funcționează aici în felul următor: poetul decupează din existența cotidiană o situație firească, banală, cunoscută de toată lumea și, printr-o întorsătură de frază, încearcă să-i dea un sens mai înalt, să o transforme într-o parabolă despre condiția umană. (Ștefănescu 2001)

Așadar, cititorul, copil sau adult, este invitat să decodifice înțelesul adânc al textului, uneori mai evident, alteori profund ascuns. Un exemplu concludent de intertextualitate se poate observa în capitolul „Gâștele în afară de pericol“, în care maestrul tehnicii aluziei face referire la *Amintiri din copilărie* și la *Ursul păcălit de vulpe* de Ion Creangă, la *Găinușa cea moțată* de Călin Gruia și, în mod evident, la *Povestea gâștelor* de George Coșbuc. Următorul fragment este sugestiv pentru modul în care Sorescu reușește să încâlcească în mod creativ personaje, teme, imagini și proverbe, construind o lume labirintică din care cititorul iese îmbogățit:

— Cum să nu ne jelim, când uite ce pățim!? Vecinele noastre, țatele rațele, ne-au lăsat pe drumuri: au mințit întruna pînă ne-au înghețat apa, de-au făcut-o cuburi. Sint două zile de cînd stăm aici pe mal și nu putem să ne scaldăm. Că în gheață nu poți nici măcar să te uzi, darmită să te scufunzi. Ne-am da măcar de-a săniușul, dar, una, nu ne șade, două, ce ne facem de labe? Că dacă pe gheață le tocim, într-o săptămînă le isprăvim. Și n-o să mai avem cu ce cutreiera poienele, doar labele nu ne cresc în fiecare primăvară ca pantofii voștri, sau ca nouă penele. Deci, cum să nu plîngem, copiii dumneavoastră, cînd închiși în această situație nu putem sări pe nici o fereastră? (Sorescu 1966: 40)

Parodia și metatextul sunt și ele folosite de autor în *Unde fugim de acasă?*, creînd un efect puternic supra cititorului, care observă comentariile acestuia sau ale personajelor asupra textului. În capitolul „Într-o poveste“, jocul de-a v-ați ascunselea devine și un joc metatextual, în care copiii își trăiesc aventura la poarta basmului *Prâslea cel Voinic și merele de aur*, conștienți că este doar o poveste. Textul se creează pe măsură ce se citește, personajele înțelegînd că sunt parte dintr-o poveste și, urcate într-un copac, pot vedea povestea următoare, pe care cititorul captivat o va citi avînd curiozitatea stîrnită în mod eficient de participarea inedită a personajelor. Metatextul devine un joc în sine, un joc pe care Sorescu îl joacă cu textul, cu personajele, dar și cu cititorul, care este fermecat, “forțat” să-și continue lectura datorită împrietenirii cu personajele care-i vorbesc. Simona Laurian arată că

o analiză mai atentă a povestioarelor duce la o concluzie cât se poate de interesantă: orice paragraf, din oricare loc ar fi el, poate fi perceput și înțeles ca o entitate de-sine-stătătoare, ca un joc de cuvinte și situații. Este un artificiu specific prozei soresciene pentru copii, care creează în *Unde fugim de acasă?* un efect de *stand-up cafe*, cu intrare liberă pentru cei mici, dar și pentru cei mari. În fața lor se află actorii naratori, ce intră unul câte unul, pe rând. Copiii auditori se găsesc în primele rânduri, la un pahar de proze în versuri, cu ritm și rimă, cu cuvinte familiare spuse fără fardoseală sau pretenții, cu aventuri în cotidian, în timp ce părinții lor stau alături de ei discutând pe îndelete la un pahar de vin parfumat și vechi, din timpuri imemorabile, sau fumând o țigară de gânduri. Cu toții însă râd și se simt bine, unii consumându-și pe loc copilăria, alții savurând cu nesaț amintirea ei. (Laurian 2010: 315)

În Loc de Concluzii

Volumul pentru copii atrage și acum cititori, de aceea Editura Art continuă publicarea acestuia, cel mai recent tiraj apărând în aprilie 2020, pentru care Florin Bican realizează o recenzie specială, mimând opera lui Sorescu și sugerând măreția unui autor a cărui operă nu încetează să uimească:

Pentru toți cei ce-ncearcă să iasă – când nu-i mai încape tableta, nici patul – din casă, dar ușa e-nchisă și pereții nu-i lasă și nici n-au cum face să sară pe fereastră afară, am un secret: știu eu o carte care face pereții să se dea la o parte, topește tavanul un-doi, și lasă Afara să vină la noi. Iar Afara adie cu miresme din spațiu și te-mbie, te-mbie, s-o respiri cu nesațiu, și sosește cu fluturi scăpărând în culori, ce-ți arată că – Uite! – și tu poți să zbori... Iar de zborul nu-ți place, atunci poți să o rogi pe Afară s-aducă un cal alb de dârlogi – pân' la tine-n odaie... Și – de pe-un scăunel – vei putea să te urci deîndată pe el. Dar ai grijă cum stai! Țin' te bine în șa! Strânge frâul în mână și fii gata! Așa... Gândește-te-acum încotro ai vrea, oare, să te poarte căluțul la el în spinare. Dacă vrei, te va duce la mare – te va duce-ntr-o clipă, galopând *clip-clop-clip* – unde valuri albastre aștern pe nisip, aduse cu ele de foarte departe, atâtea povești cât să facă o carte. Dar fiecare poveste a lor este vie și e gata să-ți fie – în nisip – jucărie. Iar dacă dorești o poveste mai bună, îți poți ruga calul să te ducă pe lună – se va transforma sub tine, deîndată, în girafă și te va purta prin valuri, ridicându-te din apă, către lună când răsare, rotundă și mare, din mare. Iar pe lună poți face absolut tot ce-ți place – fiindcă acolo suntem toți mai ușori. Poți, de pildă, să zbori... Vă spun pe cuvânt – am umblat peste tot pe pământ, ba chiar și pe alte planete, fără să mai fie nevoie să-mi pun pălărie și ghete. Peste tot am umblat, fără să fie nevoie măcar să mă dau jos din pat. Vă-ntrebați oare cum am ajuns atât de departe? Păi vă spun – am deschis pur și simplu o carte. Și nici nu era o carte prea groasă – *Unde fugim de acasă* se numea cartea asta. Am citit-o, și basta... E scrisă de-un poet, Marin Sorescu, și-aș putea s-o

citesc cu aceeași plăcere de-o mie de ori: de fiecare dată pare nouă. V-o recomand deci și vouă – citiți-o oricând veți simți că statul în casă v-apasă și ați vrea să fugiți... să fugiți de acasă. (Bican, 2020)

În recenzia sa plină de afecțiune pentru *Unde fugim de-acasă?*, Bican subliniază măiestria lui cu care Sorescu creează o evadare simbolică pentru cititorii de toate vârstele și își exprimă admirația față de capacitatea autorului de a transforma o simplă carte într-o fereastră deschisă către lumi pline de imaginație, un loc unde limitele dispar, iar visul și realitatea se împletesc. Cartea, deși aparent destinată copiilor, redă farmecul copilăriei prin joc și umor, fiind un portal care-și invită cititorii de toate vârstele să exploreze, să viseze și să evadeze în propria fantezie. *Unde fugim de-acasă?* este nu doar o operă literară, ci un manifest al libertății imaginare, arătând cum Sorescu desființează granițele genurilor și deschide noi drumuri în literatura pentru copii. Lucrarea continuă să inspire și să provoace bucurie, confirmându-și autorul ca scriitor inovator, capabil să pătrundă în esența copilăriei și s-o redea în mod unic și etern relevant.

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THROUGH THE GLASS: SELFHOOD, PERCEPTION, AND THE URBAN GAZE IN WOOLF'S WORKS⁴

CHIA-CHIEH MAVIS TSENG*

ABSTRACT. Since its emergence as an industrial material in the late nineteenth century, glass has transformed cityscapes, perceptions of space, and interactions with the material world. Beyond its technological role, glass acts as a metaphor for the complexities of modern urban life, serving simultaneously as both a medium and a barrier. It reflects contradictions and paradoxes, exploring the relationships between the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible, and subjects and objects. Glass functions as a frame or screen through which we perceive, understand, and develop taste. One of the defining features of urban modernity, glass also intrigued Virginia Woolf, who frequently used it in her works to explore identity, self-representation, and desire. Mirrors and windows, recurring symbols in her writing, often convey anxiety and self-doubt, particularly for female characters. Glass serves as both a medium of connection and an obstacle to understanding, representing transparency, reflectiveness, and the complexity of perception. In *Night and Day* (1919), Woolf compares window displays to women walking in the streets, examining the commodified gaze and how it shapes self-image and societal views. This essay explores how Woolf's writing reflects the metaphors of glass and how it informs her self-concept as a writer in the publishing world.

KEY WORDS: Woolf, glass, gaze, mirror, windows, reflection, transparency, *Night and Day*

Introduction

Since glass became a key industrial material in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, it has reshaped our cityscapes, altered our perceptions of space, and

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* CHIA-CHIEH MAVIS TSENG (Ph.D in Comparative Literature, Rutgers University, New Jersey, 2013) is Director of and Associate Professor at the Language Center of Taipei Medical University, with an interest in visual culture, urban modernity, and the works of Amy Levy, Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Tati. Her most recent book is *Memory Made, Hacked, and Outsourced* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). E-mail: mavistseng@tmu.edu.tw.

transformed our interactions with the material world. Glass is not only a technological innovation with its own industrial history, but also a rich source of metaphors that reflect the complexities of modern urban life. It serves as both medium and barrier, acting as a point of intersection where narrative contradictions and paradoxes emerge. In this way, glass enables us to explore the relationships between subjects and objects, the material and the immaterial, urbanites and their environment, spectators and spectacles, consumers and commodities, as well as the visible and invisible, exterior and interior, and representation and the represented. As such, glass is a crucial substance—a frame or screen through which we view the world, construct knowledge, and cultivate taste.

As one of the defining features of urban modernity, glass also captivated Virginia Woolf's imagination. Throughout her writings, Woolf uses glass to explore themes of identity, self-representation, desire, and the altered modes of perception introduced by window displays. This essay examines Woolf's engagement with glass—both in her treatment of it as a subject and as a metaphor. Glass, in the form of mirrors and windows, frequently appears in her works as a significant trope, though its meanings are often complex and contradictory. The mirror, in particular, becomes a site of both identity formation and public scrutiny, driving Woolf's female characters into states of anxiety and self-doubt.

Woolf also writes about glass itself—its transparency, translucency, and reflectiveness. Notably, she explores the window display, a symbol of the changing modes of consumption and new ways of seeing. The window display complicates how individuals perceive themselves and others. In *Night and Day* (1919), for example, Woolf parallels the window display with the image of a woman walking down the street, highlighting the mediated gaze and the commodified nature of vision.

Finally, this essay considers how Woolf's writings function metaphorically as glass themselves. Just as glass serves as a medium for reflection and visibility, Woolf's works provide a lens through which she explores her own identity and her role as a writer in the publishing industry. Glass, in this sense, becomes both a metaphorical and literal tool for Woolf's creative imagination.

Mirrors, Self-Perception, and Social Judgment

Woolf often expressed discomfort with her own reflection. In a letter to her friend Ethel Smyth, she confessed, "I hate my own face in the looking glass"

(Letters V: 38 in Skrbic 2004). She frequently associates her mirror image with feelings of shame and guilt. In *A Sketch of the Past* (1939), she emphasizes the solitary, almost forbidden nature of looking in the mirror. This unease with reflection is echoed throughout her fiction. In her short story “The New Dress” (1927), the protagonist Mabel’s encounter with a mirror exposes her discomfort and self-doubt. At a party hosted by Mrs. Dalloway, Mabel quickly realizes her dress is inadequate compared to those of the other guests. She retreats to a corner where she faces a mirror but cannot bear to fully confront the “horror” of her appearance. Feeling like “a dressmaker’s dummy,” Mabel becomes an object of public scrutiny, vulnerable to judgment and criticism. The mirror here symbolizes not only social judgment but also self-objectification, as Mabel sees herself as something to be inspected and critiqued. Her comparison to a mannequin suggests the deep entanglement of her self-image with the culture of display and commodification.

This moment in *Mrs. Dalloway* mirrors a similar scene in *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë, where Lucy, confronted by her own reflection at a ball, feels inferior to her elegant godmother and Dr. John. Both scenes delve into the anxiety tied to self-perception and the pressure of external judgment. A comparable moment unfolds in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925/2005), when Elizabeth’s governess, Miss Kilman, faces the harsh realities of her lack of feminine beauty—not at a party, but in a department store.

From the outset, Miss Kilman is portrayed as a quasi-feminist, disdainful of the feminine ideals imposed by patriarchal society and consumer culture. Woolf desexualizes Miss Kilman’s appearance, creating the illusion that she rejects everything the ideal bourgeois woman (embodied in Clarissa) represents, and is thus immune to the allure of consumer luxury. However, when Miss Kilman visits the Army and Navy Store with Elizabeth to buy a petticoat, she finds herself helplessly vulnerable. Overwhelmed by the dazzling spectacle of commodities, she feels ashamed of her inability to afford a decent petticoat. A woman who has never dressed to please is suddenly self-conscious of her homely appearance: “she could not afford to buy pretty clothes” (Woolf 2005a: 126).

In this scene, the department store, with its goods and well-dressed shoppers, acts like a mirror, forcing Miss Kilman to confront her social and physical inferiority. The display window, with its carefully curated images of femininity and wealth, reflects her sense of inadequacy. Miss Kilman, who has long tried to find self-assurance in her dignity and intelligence, is now confronted with the harsh reality of her own vulnerabilities. When Elizabeth leaves her alone, Miss Kilman’s experience becomes even more disorienting

and humiliating. Wandering through the store, she becomes lost amid the array of goods—“hams, drugs, flowers, stationery”—each a symbol of the consumer world she cannot access. In a moment of acute self-awareness, she sees herself reflected in a mirror, “blundering” with her hat askew and her face flushed, embodying her sense of failure.

The department store, with its displays, the shoppers, the shop girls who view her with disdain, and the mirror itself, all function symbolically as mirrors that reflect Miss Kilman’s repressed desires. In comparison to the idealized femininity around her, she sees what she is not, what she lacks, and what she cannot afford—forcing her to face unacknowledged desires and insecurities that she had not recognized until this moment of exposure in the store.

From Window to Window: Connections

Woolf’s first novel, *Night and Day* (1919), set in London, follows Katharine Hilbery and her friend Mary Datchet as they grapple with the tensions between marriage and career, love and independence. The novel, as its title suggests, is structured around a series of binaries. Rachel Wetzsteon notes that while “day” represents “the comforting clarity of norm and tradition,” “night” symbolizes “the alluring murk of vision and innovation” (Wetzsteon in Woolf 2005b: xxvii). These oppositions extend to the characters’ personalities, beliefs, and tastes. Katharine, for instance, is drawn to mathematics, while Rodney prefers literature; she admires Dostoevsky, while he enjoys Alexander Pope. Their contrasting literary preferences mirror the broader thematic binaries of the novel—science and art, reason and emotion, tradition and innovation. In this sense, the novel itself embodies the conjunction in its title, “and,” exploring the complexities and challenges of reconciling opposites.

In her exploration of human connection, Woolf uses glass as both a medium and a barrier. Throughout the novel, characters are often positioned by windows, either looking out or looking in. The cityscape viewed through these windows serves as a mirror to the characters’ inner worlds, reflecting their mental and emotional states. These encounters with glass thus become pivotal moments where characters’ perceptions of themselves and their relationships to others, or to the city as a whole, are vividly expressed.

In domestic settings, the window often serves as a space for contemplation, where characters seek reassurance for the future or inspiration to escape their current circumstances. For instance, when Katharine grows weary of her relatives’ gossip about her cousin’s marriage, she turns to the window: “She stood among the folds of the curtain, pressing close to the window-pane, gaz-

ing disconsolately at the river, much like a child depressed by the meaningless talk of its elders” (Woolf 2005b: 108). In such moments, it becomes Katharine’s habit to retreat to the window, doing nothing, when she realizes that her values and thoughts are at odds with those of her mother and the other older figures in the room.

The window in *Night and Day* symbolizes the threshold between the domestic and the public spheres. Katharine’s physical position—standing by the window—mirrors her internal conflict between adhering to traditional expectations and seeking the more independent life represented by her friend Mary Datchet. In the following window scene, the titular opposition of “night and day” is both explicit and meaningful:

she looked out of the window, sternly determined to forget private misfortunes, to forget herself, to forget individual lives. With her eyes upon the dark sky, voices reached her from the room in which she was standing. She heard them as if they came from people in another world, a world antecedent to her world, a world that was the prelude, the antechamber to reality; it was as if, lately dead, she heard the living talking. The dream nature of our life had never been more apparent to her, never had life been more certainly an affair of four walls, whose objects existed only within the range of lights and fires, beyond which lay nothing, or nothing more than darkness. She seemed physically to have stepped beyond the region where the light of illusion still makes it desirable to possess, to love, to struggle. And yet her melancholy brought her no serenity. She still heard the voices within the room. She was still tormented by desires. She wished to be beyond their range. She wished inconsistently enough that she could find herself driving rapidly through the streets... (Woolf 2005b: 307)

The window offers Katharine a moment to position herself imaginatively in relation to a world filled with greater possibilities and change. Yet, it also reinforces the opposition between two separate realms: the domestic interior and the public world outside, a world of light versus a world of darkness. In this scene, Katharine acknowledges that her life is confined to the four walls of the room, which symbolize the roles imposed upon women as wives and mothers. Standing at the window, she occupies the space between night and day, darkness and light, tradition and innovation, caught between the desire for a life beyond her grasp and the reality that lies just out of reach on the other side of the window.

The way a character engages with a window scene reflects their relationship with the outside world. For Mary Datchet, a woman who finds fulfillment

in both her college education and her work for the women's rights movement, the window symbolizes a sense of control. From her office, she feels as though she could direct the flow of the world outside with a mere glance. At one point, Ralph's dismissive comment about the futility of her work unsettles her, but she quickly regains her confidence and resolve as she returns to the familiar space of her office:

She flung up the window and stood by it, looking out. The street lamps were already lit; and through the mist in the square one could see little figures hurrying across the road and along the pavement, on the farther side. In her absurd mood of lustful arrogance, Mary looked at the little figures and thought, "If I liked I could make you go in there or stop short; I could make you walk in single file or in double file; I could do what I liked with you." (Woolf 2005b: 148)

Her window scene reflects her regained confidence and self-assurance, making her feel that she "knew the ways of this world," which was a "shapely, orderly place" (2005b: 147).

However, her complacency turns into uncertainty later. Though she is secretly in love with Ralph, she refuses Ralph's proposal to marry him and feels offended, for she realizes he is actually in love with Katharine. It is heartbreaking for Mary to realize that she has just abandoned the opportunity to spend her life with the person she loves. She then contemplates the incompatibility of a woman's marriage and career ambition, and the gains and losses in her life as a woman and a suffragist. In the middle of her paperwork, Mary rests her pen on the table, and gets lost in the scene of the large hotel across the square. The window scene in her eyes dovetails to her inner feelings:

... her mind pursued its own journey among the sun-blazoned windows and the drifts of purplish smoke which formed her view. And, indeed, this background was by no means out of keeping with her thoughts. She saw to the remote spaces behind the strife of the foreground, enabled now to gaze there, since she had renounced her own demands, privileged to see the larger view, to share the vast desires and sufferings of the mass of mankind. She had been too lately and too roughly mastered by facts to take an easy pleasure in the relief of renunciation; such satisfaction as she felt came only from the discovery that, having renounced everything that made life happy, easy, splendid, individual, there remained a hard reality, unimpaired by one's personal adventures, remote as the stars, unquenchable as they are. (Woolf 2005b: 227-28)

She is looking at the scene outside as if she is looking at her own life path. Instead of fixing her gaze on the more immediate happiness and satisfaction in one's personal life, she is focusing on what lies behind: her efforts and dream to improve gender equality and lessen the suffering of the people. This bittersweet realization is represented in her gaze on the cityscape seen through her window, while she is undergoing "this curious transformation from the particular to the universal" (2005b: 228). It is the existence of the window that allows Mary to imagine her connection to the world outside and inspires her to think through her life-changing decision.

As a threshold to connect oneself to the outside world, a window appears both in the beginning and in the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the opening scene in her trip to buy flowers, Clarissa is excited to abandon herself in the London city: "What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air" (Woolf 2005a: 3). José Luís Araújo Lima argues that the window is an entrance which opens to the inside (to the vistas at Bourton, as a young Clarissa) and outside (London streets, as Mrs. Dalloway). The window, as a juncture or an intersection connecting inside and outside, the past and present, the memory and the reality, blends her separated identities, "[a]t the windows are, in fact, Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway" (Lima 2007: 111).

Clarissa's early experience at Bourton is also an exercise of curiosity and visual extension that later forms her habit of observing the old lady across the way through her window. Once, when Clarissa is contemplating the idea of Love and Religion, she looks out the window, sees the old lady, and is enlightened by a truth that is "simply this: here was one room; there another" (Woolf 2005a: 125). At that precise moment, Clarissa realizes that human minds are like our rooms, which are separated from each other and may not be transcended by religion or love.

However, the fact that she can still see through her window to gain a vision foreshadows the ending climax of her spiritual connection with Septimus through her window watching. After she hears the news of this stranger's suicide, Clarissa falls into a deep contemplation. Her thoughts on Septimus' death parallel and intertwine with, like a montage, her vision of the old woman's ending of the day:

It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to

bed. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! The old lady had put out her light! The whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun... She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself... she must assemble. (Woolf 2005a: 181-82)

The window scene, where an old lady prepares for bed and extinguishes her light, reflects Clarissa's fragmented thoughts as she tries to understand her inexplicable connection to the stranger who has just committed suicide. The possibility that the old lady might return Clarissa's gaze suggests that it is not only Clarissa who observes others' lives (or "rooms"). Standing by the window, Clarissa, too, might be seen by someone looking in her direction. This moment hints at a subtle, almost intangible bond between Clarissa and the old lady across the two spaces divided by the window.

The old lady's action of putting out her candle and going to bed symbolizes the end of her day, mirroring the death of Septimus, which marks the end of his life. This parallel links Clarissa to Septimus's death, deepening her sense of connection and prompting a shift in her own understanding of life. The window, in this sense, offers Clarissa a partial yet revelatory glimpse into something beyond herself—what is foreign, unseen, and not within her immediate reach. While the physical window in her room allows her to observe the lives of her neighbors, the metaphorical window created by her connection with the old lady offers a spiritual and mysterious link to someone she will never meet. Through these overlapping windows—though the connection is indirect and fragmented—a bond is established.

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927/1989), Woolf reinforces this image of the human mind as a windowed chamber and the attempt for potential connection and understanding through a window. In this novel, the window is an essential setting as well as an important trope in the main characters' interactions. The first section, "The Window," ends with a scene when Mrs. Ramsay stands by the window under her husband's gaze, after she realizes that she is unable to fulfill her husband's unquenchable longing for the straightforward expression of her love. In her attempt to take a break, Mrs. Ramsay turns to the sight outside the window: "Getting up, she stood at the window with the reddish-brown stocking in her hands, partly to turn away from him, partly because she remembered how beautiful it often is—the sea at night" (Woolf 1989: 123). While she is looking out, she is aware of her position as the object of her husband's gaze. Later, she gently returns his gaze as a gesture of under-

standing and love. At the moment the Ramsays achieve mutual understanding, and their previous conflict is naturally balanced, if not entirely resolved:

And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)—

“Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow. You won’t be able to go.” And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew. (Woolf 1989: 124)

Similar to the window scene in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this ending scene occurs at the end of the day, giving a sense of closure. Both for Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, a possible human connection is established, or a resolution to a previous conflict is achieved. Like chambers with windows, human minds are not completely sealed to one another.

However, it would be an oversimplification to argue that Woolf believes that one’s mind is like one’s room, and one can simply get a glimpse into another mind by peeping into its window. In her writings, Woolf often suggests that human minds are by nature unfathomable. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Lily Briscoe’s metaphor of human minds as sealed hives engages intensely in a dialectical debate with Mrs. Ramsay’s mental “window” through which connection is not impossible. Throughout the novel, Lily, an unmarried female artist, shares a bittersweet relationship with Mrs. Ramsay. She adores and loves Mrs. Ramsay in a complicated way. She feels perplexed about how she can see the “sacred inscription” of Mrs. Ramsay’s heart:

she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? (Woolf 1989: 51)

Again, in Lily’s imagination, Mrs. Ramsay’s mind is spatial; it is a room, a “secret chamber,” only it is sealed, without a window where one can peep into. The art of knowing Mrs. Ramsay’s mind eludes Lily, but the longing never leaves her:

How, then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. (Woolf 1989: 51)

In this metaphor, Lily envisions human minds as inaccessible, suggesting that the best one can do is linger on the periphery, like a bee around a hive, listening to the murmurs and stirrings that hint at the vibrant life within. The contrasting attitudes of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily toward approaching another person's mind reflect Woolf's exploration of epistemological knowledge, comparing the human mind both to a windowed room and to a secret chamber.

Window as a Wall

Septimus and Clarissa, the twin figures in *Mrs. Dalloway*, never meet, yet both grapple with the (im)possibility of human connection. At pivotal moments, both characters reference glass, though with very different outcomes. Once an idealistic and promising poet, Septimus returns from World War I suffering from shell shock. His traumatic experiences in the war have left him disillusioned and repulsed by the society he was once called to protect. As a result of his shell shock, he withdraws from the physical world, retreating further into his own troubled mind.

One day, his wife Rezia brings him out to a hat shop. There he struggles to make sense of what he sees, but fails to "feel": "As he opened the door of the room where the Italian girls sat making hats, he could see them... they were rubbing wires among coloured beads in saucers; they were turning buckram shapes this way and that... but something failed him; he could not feel" (Woolf 2005a: 85). Septimus's traumatic sense of detachment marks a contrast with his wife's fascination of window display in front of them: "And there were shops—hat shops, dress shops, shops with leather bags in the window, where she would stand staring" (2005a: 87). Later Rezia makes an exclamation when a French lady is descending from her carriage in her beautiful clothes and jewelry. Her enthusiastic reaction to the scene re-confirms Septimus' loss of connection with outside world: "'Beautiful!' she would murmur, nudging Septimus, that he might see. But beauty was *behind a pane of glass*" (Woolf 2005a: 85, italics added). The scene is seen through shop windows, so it is literally "behind a pane of glass." However, symbolically speaking, even if Septimus is not standing behind a literal window, the scene of beauty in his eyes will probably still look as if it were placed behind a pane of glass, because in his special

state of mind, he can see, but he can *only* see. Glass offers transparency at the expense of other senses. Richard Sennett once comments that plate glass gives an experience that, “Fully apprehending the outside from within, yet feeling neither cold nor wind nor moisture, is a modern sensation” (Sennett in Friedberg 2009: 117). Seeing without hearing, touch, and feeling increases the sense that what is inside is inaccessible. The following passage shows Septimus’s feeling of detachment and aloofness as it deepens: “He looked at people outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel” (Woolf 2005a: 86). Septimus at this moment moves about in the city as if he is imprisoned in an invisible box of glass. The urban images incessantly, fleetingly, and transiently come before him, but he cannot *feel* them.

At times glass in Woolf’s writings appears in the form of transparent wall between the spectator and the urban spectacle. In *Night and Day*, glass is further developed as a device of “fatal attraction” in the visual domain. When Ralph finally comes to realize that he loves Katharine and feels an impulse to share this strong feeling, he wanders around the street and sits on the Embankment for a short rest, where there is a drunken old man mumbling about his misfortune and failure. Feeling afflicted and anger, Ralph thinks about his own life, and suddenly comes up with an image of a lighthouse and lost birds:

And when the elderly man refused to listen and mumbled on, an odd image came to his mind of a lighthouse besieged by the flying bodies of lost birds, who were dashed senseless, by the gale, against the glass. He had a strange sensation that he was both lighthouse and bird; he was steadfast and brilliant; and at the same time he was whirled, with all other things, senseless against the glass. (Woolf 2005b: 342)

Again, as an echo to the novel’s title *Night and Day*, the brightness of the lighthouse here forms a sharp contrast with the darkness of senselessness and death. While the light draws birds dashed by the strong wind, glass is neglected, an invisible barrier which is not felt until the violent clash occurs.

This image is later elaborated on and extended in a specific scene when Ralph goes to Katharine’s house and fixes his gaze on her windows. The following passage compares Ralph’s gaze on Katharine’s window with the bird’s dashing to the lighthouse:

Lights burnt in the three long windows of the drawing-room. The space of the room behind became, in Ralph’s vision, the center of the dark, flying wilderness of the world; the justification for the welter of confusion surrounding it; the steady light

which cast its beams, like those of a lighthouse, with searching composure over the trackless waste.... His thoughts lingered over Mrs. Hilbery and Cassandra; and then he turned to Rodney and Mr. Hilbery. Physically, he saw them bathed in that steady flow of yellow light which filled the long oblongs of the windows; in their movements they were beautiful; and in their speech he figured a reserve of meaning, unspoken, but understood. At length, after all this half-conscious selection and arrangement, he allowed himself to approach the figure of Katharine herself; and instantly the scene was flooded with excitement. He did not see her in the body; he seemed curiously to see her as a shape of light, the light itself; he seemed, simplified and exhausted as he was, to be like one of those lost birds fascinated by the lighthouse and held to the glass by the splendor of the blaze. (Woolf 2005b: 344)

Like the lost birds which suicidally fly toward the lighthouse, Ralph is fascinated and overwhelmed by Katharine's silhouette of light emitting from the other side of the window. However, this tendency to disembody Katharine to "the light itself" suggests Ralph's inability to approach and connect with Katharine directly. The metaphor of lost birds and the lighthouse also indicates that the image one tries to comprehend and capture is always elusive and insubstantial, to the extent that it can only be represented or approached as projections or reflections. In other words, these objects of the gaze are always mediated, in this case, through the windowpane. Though Ralph subordinates his gaze to the fascination with the light from Katharine's house, the impending danger and threat implied in this allegory (whether he will, like a lost bird, hit glass) heighten intensity and anxiety to his vision. Urban images and signs that the spectators confront are the light of a lighthouse that attracts lost birds. This allegory seems to also suggest that this tragic clash is one mindless and unintentional mistake, for the lighthouse is originally designed to guide lost ships, and its use of glass is necessary to emit light. The allegory seems to address the fundamental structure of seeing in urban space, which is full of mirroring and reflection, the transient and the fleeting.

The elusive nature of the image and its representation through glass is significant in another short story by Woolf, "A Haunted House" (1921). The language of this uncanny story is artfully vague, describing a ghostly couple who haunts a house in search for their "buried treasure." The couple's existence is felt only through traces, sounds, hints, and reflections. One can never see this ghostly couple, and what one can see is always mediated by glass: "The window-panes reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green in the glass" (Woolf 1967: 122). Elusive and ambiguous words such as "it" or "here" which resist proper recognition and coherence dominate the narrative. The

purposeful abstraction and concealment of the object of the gaze in Woolf's writing are made possible by glass, as a symbol of the obstacle to knowledge.

This exploration on an epistemological (im)possibility is highlighted by Woolf's connection with glass and death:

A moment later the light had faded. Out in the garden then? But the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun. So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass; death was between us; coming to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the windows, the rooms were darkened. (Woolf 1967: 123)

Woolf is once again drawn to the contrast and blurred boundary between light and darkness, life and death. While she attempts to expose these murky areas, she ultimately fails to fully penetrate them. Instead, she makes a concerted effort to look through something that is inherently invisible or unknowable. In this context, glass acts as both a barrier and a medium—separating the representation from the represented, while also serving as a tool to explore the possibility of representing the fundamentally unfathomable. This tension between representation and the limits of knowing is a recurring theme in Woolf's work, particularly in her short story "The Lady in the Looking-glass: Reflection" (1929), which I will discuss later.

Street Haunting and Window Shopping

In urban space, the relationship between the inanimate and the animate undergoes drastic changes. Marx illuminates that in modern capitalism, human relations are mediated by materials, and Benjamin notices that, walking in a world composed of ubiquitous display and commodities, the *flâneur* himself, unable to resist the strong whirl of capitalism and commodification, becomes merchandise, too. Woolf is quite aware of this prevalent standard to evaluate things based on their "commodity value." In her essay "The Docks of London" (1932), she describes, "Oddities, beauties, rarities may occur, but if so, they are instantly tested for their mercantile value" (Woolf 2006: 11), and "every commodity in the world has been examined and graded according to its use and value" (2006: 12). The city of London is characterized by this juxtaposition and montage of colorful signs, transparent show windows, and carefully composed window displays. In "Oxford Street Tide" (1932), London is not a city to be preserved eternally, but to be enjoyed for its very transient quality: "The charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give

a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was desired and attempted by the old builders and their patrons, the nobility of England” (Woolf 2006: 24).

The acts of window dressing and window shopping are prevalent in Woolf’s novels. In her flower-buying trip, Mrs. Dalloway observes that “the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans.” Mrs. Dalloway identifies herself with the other window shoppers and needs to remind herself to refrain from impulse-buying: “(but one must economise, not buy things rashly for Elizabeth)” (Woolf 2005a: 5).

Unlike Clarissa, who seems to still side with the customer, Mary Datchet in *Night and Day* keeps her distance from the window display as a critical observer:

Now and then she would pause and look into the window of some bookseller or flower shop, where, at this early hour, the goods were being arranged, and empty gaps behind the plate glass revealed a state of undress. Mary felt kindly disposed towards the shopkeepers, and hoped that they would trick the midday public into purchasing, for at this hour of the morning she ranged herself entirely on the side of the shopkeepers and bank clerks, and regarded all who slept late and had money to spend as her enemy and natural prey. (Woolf 2005b: 67)

While she is observing the show window being decorated and arranged, Mary is conscious that these goods are presented in order to attract passersby to go inside, take money out of their pockets, and buy the commodity. Mary is not like the overwhelmed female shoppers who lose their minds in front of window displays, partly because the scene she sees at the moment is not a completed work. Mary, as a woman who has her own job, understands that window-dressing is part of the shop-keeper’s “work.” Her working experience and knowledge allow her to see beyond her range of vision. Mary identifies the act of window-dressing as a strategy of advertisement, as part of commercialism.

Woolf is well aware of the fact that the constantly changing cityscape results in an urgent need for modern people to adjust our ways of seeing. In her “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1927), Woolf offers us a new angle to rethink urban spectatorship. First, she celebrates the delight of “street haunting,” embracing the crowd, joining the anonymous army on the street, the pleasure of being a passerby: “As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is

so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room" (Woolf 1970: 20-21). In this space of display and spectacle, the visual is privileged to the extent that the female narrator becomes "a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye" (1970: 22). Miraculously, under her gaze, the London street in the winter evening is "at once revealed and obscured" (1970: 22), probably under the working of ubiquitous glass.

It is also notable that not only shop windows, but also domestic windows, entice the passerby to a scene for display:

Here vaguely one can trace symmetrical straight avenues of doors and windows; here under the lamps are floating islands of pale light through which pass quickly bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had given life the slip, so that life, deceived of her prey, blunders on without them. (Woolf 1970: 22)

Each man and woman, rich or poor, young or old, even "the humped, the twisted, the deformed," invariably join the series of signs and images on the street to form a unique spectacle mysteriously tinged with beauty. It is admirable to see how Woolf, as if presenting her dreamlike reverie, aesthetically represents "this maimed company of the halt and the blind" as a grotesque group that is fused into the world of commerce and display:

They lie close to those shop windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans; tables inlaid with baskets of many coloured fruit; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea. (Woolf 1970: 26-27)

Woolf's blending of natural images (swans, fruit, sea) to compare a city street with an ocean reminds us of the opening passage of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926), in which he describes the intoxicated gaze as he strolls through the "aquariums" into which the Passage de l'*Opéra* is transformed (Woolf 1970: 14). Similar to what Woolf's female stroller sees, in Aragon's narrator's eyes, the ordinariness in everyday life is a work of art. Attracted to a window display of a cane shop, the narrator is astonished to see the window "was bathed in a greenish, almost submarine light, the source of which remained invisible." He continues, "it was the same kind of phosphorescence that, I remember, emanated from the fish I watched, as a child..." and he hears a sort of noise from the shop, which "was the same voice of the seashells that has never ceased to

amaze poets and film-stars” (1970: 22). The commodities, the canes, “floated gently like seaweed” (1970: 22). He apprehends the marvelous suffusing of everyday existence, celebrates the mundane glories in an anti-elitist gaze, and eulogizes the ordinary to spell out a utopia in which everyone is an artist.

In “Street Haunting,” the narrator’s gaze is moderate and non-penetrative. It should follow a flow and there is no need to focus on one thing too deeply or for too long. No matter how curious one may be, one should rest one’s gaze on the surface only: “The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (Woolf 1970: 22). Though Woolf also recognizes that curiosity and a desire for complete knowledge is human nature, she still finds it necessary to moderate her gaze carefully:

But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendour of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows. (Woolf 1970: 23)

In order not to immerse oneself too deeply or too sentimentally in the thought aroused by “oddities, suffering, and sordidities,” the observer turns her gaze to the omnibuses, the steaks, the flowers, the things people can really make use of or consume. This unwillingness to dwell in the contemplation or reflection of the scene too long and a conscious shift of one’s gaze to the display are also observable in *Night and Day*.

The moment occurs when Ralph realizes with surprise and uneasiness that Mary is not just his loyal friend, but a woman who is secretly in love with him. In order to calm himself, Ralph disciplines his chaotic thoughts and emotions by resting his gaze on the signs and spectacles outside the window:

In his agitation Ralph rose, turned his back upon Mary, and looked out of the window. The people in the street seemed to him only a dissolving and combining pattern of black particles; which, for the moment, represented very well the involuntary procession of feelings and thoughts which formed and dissolved in rapid succession in his own mind. At one moment he exulted in the thought that Mary loved him; at the next, it seemed that he was without feeling for her; her love was repulsive to him.

Now he felt urged to marry her at once; now to disappear and never see her again. In order to control this disorderly race of thought he forced himself to read the name on the chemist's shop directly opposite him; then to examine the objects in the shop windows, and then to focus his eyes exactly upon a little group of women looking in at the great windows of a large draper's shop. This discipline having given him at least a superficial control of himself. (Woolf 2005b: 201)

The observer consciously embraces the display and spectacle to indulge in the superficial scene the city offers, to focus on the fleeting, the transient, and the fragmentary, in an attempt not to “dig” too deep or too long. Like the narrator in “Street Haunting,” we should not see or explore more than the eye or the mind approves. To shift one's attention from the internal chaos to the external spectacle seems to be a mechanism of defense developed by urban dwellers.

Woolf's celebration of a seemingly superficial yet creative gaze appears to be a critical response to the materialism and commercialization in urban society and consumer culture. In the beginning, the narrator claims that her pretext to go for a walk is to buy a pencil. This trivial purchase is more of an “invented” legitimate excuse than a necessity. Woolf feels dissatisfied that one has to be producing or consuming something in order to move around in urban space. Through the text of “Street Haunting,” Woolf shows an alternative to harmlessly “consume” the urban scene by exercising the art of “just looking.” This also seems to be a perfect and safe way to interact with the urban images and signs: “With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances” (Woolf 1970: 27).

In “Street Haunting,” Woolf suggests that in a society that invites, encourages, or even compels consumption, one must master the art of window shopping—the art of “just looking.” This idea can be seen as a critical response to her earlier metaphor of a lost bird crashing into the window of a lighthouse. The seemingly superficial yet self-satisfied act of spectatorship, embodied by the female stroller in “Street Haunting,” offers a new perspective on how one can observe the display behind a pane of glass with ease, avoiding the dangerous clash between desire and reality.

The Consuming Gaze

The emergent window display changes the shopping environment and cityscapes, as well as people's ways of seeing. In *Night and Day*, Woolf parallels the commodities on display with the female figures walking on the street in London in 1910 (the year after Selfridges's opening). One afternoon, while Ralph is walking on the Strand for an interview with a lawyer, he sees Katha-

rine by chance. As a keen consumer, Ralph pictures the figure of Katharine on the street in parallel with the commodities on display behind shop windows on both sides:

The afternoon light was almost over, and already streams of greenish and yellowish artificial light were being poured into an atmosphere which, in country lanes, would now have been soft with the smoke of wood fires; and on both sides of the road the shop windows were full of sparkling chains and highly polished leather cases, which stood upon shelves made of thick plate-glass. None of these different objects was seen separately by Denham, but from all of them he drew an impression of stir and cheerfulness. Thus it came about that he saw Katharine Hilbery coming towards him, and looked straight at her, as if she were only an illustration of the argument that was going forward in his mind. In this spirit he noticed the rather set expression in her eyes, and the slight, half-conscious movement of her lips, which, together with her height and the distinction of her dress, made her look as if the scurrying crowd impeded her, and her direction were different from theirs. (Woolf 2005b: 114)

Katharine here seems to emerge directly from Ralph's window shopping, above the crowd. As Elizabeth Outka rightly points out, "The very qualities that make up Katharine's distinction in dress and appearance are what might be suggested, reproduced, and sold behind a shop window" (2005b: 138). Here Katharine is seen as a mobile commodity, an animated store mannequin, which Ralph consumes visually without actually purchasing.

Like a spell, Katharine's image mesmerizes Ralph, making him desire more of her image so that he keeps looking:

Where should he go? To walk through the streets of London until he came to Katharine's house, to look up at the windows and fancy her within, seemed to him possible for a moment; and then he rejected the plan almost with a blush as, with a curious division of consciousness, one plucks a flower sentimentally and throws it away, with a blush, when it is actually picked. (Woolf 2005b: 115)

Ralph's commodification of Katharine's body is evident in his desire to fancy Katharine outside her window, as if this was an extension to his window shopping on the Strand, as though Katharine in her own room was an elegant mannequin in a store window.

Later, a similar moment takes place when Ralph accidentally casts a glimpse of Katharine walking on the street through a restaurant window. He fails to recognize Katharine as a human figure before he visually fragmentizes her, fixing his gaze on her gloves:

... he was about to turn and ask the waiter to bring the bill, when his eye was caught by a tall figure walking quickly along the opposite pavement—a tall figure, upright, dark, and commanding, much detached from her surroundings. She held her gloves in her left hand, and the left hand was bare. All this Ralph noticed and enumerated and recognized before he put a name to the whole—Katharine Hilbery... This sudden apparition had an extraordinary effect upon him. (Woolf 2005b: 201-202)

Like a would-be shopper experiences in front of a shop window, Ralph is tantalized by Katharine's image, an extension to his window shopping, looking at display with a dreamy, enchanting, and apparitional quality. These images are made more desirable because they are at once seemingly approachable and yet out of reach.

This male gaze that commodifies a female figure also appears in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when Peter Walsh follows an unknown woman on the street. Like Baudelaire's poem "To a Passerby" (1861), it is an urban romance of "love at last sight." The woman in Peter's eyes is not totally indistinguishable from the commodities displayed in both shop windows. At one moment he even wonders if the woman is literally a commodity herself (a prostitute):

Was she, he wondered, respectable?... But other people got between them in the street, obstructing him, blotting her out. He pursued; she changed. There was colour in her cheeks, mockery in her eyes; he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties, yellow dressing-gowns, pipes, fishing-rods, in the shop windows; and respectability and evening parties and spruced old men wearing white slips beneath their waistcoats. He was a buccaneer. On and on she went, across Piccadilly, and up Regent Street, ahead of him, her cloak, her gloves, her shoulders combining with the fringes and the laces and the feather boas in the windows to make the spirit of finery and whimsy which dwindled out of the shops on to the pavement, as the light of a lamp goes wavering at night over hedges in the darkness. (Woolf 2005a: 52-53)

Peter's wild imagination, similar to Ralph's, intertwines the unknown woman's image into the spectacle of commodities. The interaction between the male gaze and the object of the gaze (the female body) parallels that between the window shopper and the window display. The distance is essential in forming both relations, and the viewer's desire is sustained and created by the ever-changing quality of the object: "he pursued; she changed." Woolf vividly

grasps a related pattern of romance and gazing inspired and mediated by window displays in modern urban life.

Glass and Writing

In Woolf's imagination, the act of writing and a writer's relation with readers and public opinion are also related to a window image, though she includes her contempt and complaints about her lack of freedom as a writer under public scrutiny and about the commodification of literature. To Woolf, a writer in the glare of publicity is just "like a trouser mender in Oxford Street, with a horde of reviewers pressing their noses to glass and commenting to a curious crowd upon each stitch" ("Reviewing," Woolf 1967: 213). While expressing her disapproval of the limitations imposed by reviewers and the reading public on the writer's creativity, Woolf's comparison of a writer to a trouser mender illuminates the distance between the representation and the represented, maintained by a pane of glass. It is notable that she imagines a writer as a "trouser mender," instead of a "tailor," so as to imply that a writer is adding or working on some piece of cloth that already exists, rather than making a new one. A writer's creativity is based on something real, something ready to be used. In addition, the readers or reviewers have to press their noses "against the window" in order to see what happens inside.

Woolf's metaphor of a writer as a trouser mender working behind a window also foregrounds novel writing as a process of producing commodities. The writer is placed behind the window, and, in a sense, she is forced to display what she produces. Books were among the earliest commodities circulating around the world, and the novel is said to be a commodity-form of literature. Novels are like other commodities not only in their objective status as saleable goods, but also in the novel experiences they promise (Bowly 1985: 14). This is why Woolf cannot hide her anxiety and uneasiness about her status as a producer of cultural commodities under close critical scrutiny.

Glass also sheds new light on Woolf's thoughts on the conjunction of modernist aesthetics and consumer culture. For example, "Street Haunting" is not merely a *flânerie* about a special mode of gaze which is creative but not overly penetrative, but also a symbol of writing itself, the act and the process of creating. (There are many symbols of writing in "Street Haunting." The narrator is going out to buy a "pencil," the tool one needs to write. The shops the narrator enters are a bookstore [the work of art] and a stationary, which also highlight the fact that one of Woolf's aims in this story is to explore the connection between walking and writing.) The female narrator takes her freedom

to make stories out of each chance encounter she has on this urban journey, to playfully yet harmlessly become someone else for a little while:

Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (Woolf 1970: 36)

With no intension of penetrative scrutiny, she constantly changes her focus and stays only on the surface. At times, she may want to “dally a little longer,” but she makes it clear that her gaze should not dig “deeper than he eye approves” and should “be content still with surfaces only” (Woolf 1970: 23). This is a story of window shopping *par excellence*, a *flâneuse’s* gaze, and the city both as a setting for wandering and inspiration for story-making.

This superficial but creative gaze, which I previously argue to be a possible resolution to avoid the dangerous clash (to be excessively attracted to the object of gaze, or the image behind glass) that Woolf worries about, also spells out the essential core of Woolf’s beliefs and views on literature itself. In her “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Woolf makes a distinction between the writing style of “the Edwardians” (Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy) and that of “the Georgians” (Joyce, Forster, Lawrence, Eliot, Strachey). Woolf disputes the former groups to be realists, whose works tend to be meticulously over-detailed. In another essay “Modern Fiction” (1925), Woolf categorizes “Edwardians” as “materialists” who obsessively observe the object, which she regards as counterproductive and unnecessary.

Alex Zwerdling (1986: 16) clarifies that the reason why Woolf dismisses Edwardians’ over attention to material details and circumstantial facts is not because she asks for an “‘insight’—the ability to see into the inner nature of things.” Rather, what she finds distasteful is Bennett’s unselective vision which, for Woolf, is exhausting, laborious, and emotionless. Woolf believes that an evasive image stirs more creative imagination than a lucid vision (and to her a lucid vision is either illusory or impossible). These inspired thoughts, interesting though fragmentary, could sparkle like a diligent ant. In her words, “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it” (CSF 83). The work of art is precisely created during this interplay of lifting and leaving. This sug-

gests Woolf's lack of interest or belief in attaining a complete and exhaustive understanding of the outside world. Aesthetically Woolf values obscurity or translucency more than pure transparency.

Woolf again relies on glass to highlight the paradoxical nature of represented reality.

"The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" (1929) is a *tour de force* in which Woolf deals with a self-conscious pursuit of an unfathomable character and the unreliability of a mirror, an instrument which, ironically, is designed to be a neutral medium of revelation. The story begins with a somewhat provocative statement: "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime" (Woolf 1985: 221). The narrator then reveals that she is observing an old lady named Isabella Tyson's room in its reflected form: "One could see reflected in the Italian glass not only the marble-topped table opposite, but a stretch of the garden beyond. One could see a long grass path leading between banks of tall flowers until, slicing off an angle, the gold rim cut it off" (1985: 221). The view is sliced off by the gilt rim of the mirror, like a picture that grasps a transient moment; yet unlike a picture, the mirror scene is constantly changing: "nothing stayed the same for two seconds together" (1985: 221). The owner of this room may appear in the narrator's vision a moment and then quickly vanishes. Sometimes the reflected image can be entirely altered by unexpected and unidentifiable intrusion: "Suddenly these reflections were ended violently—and yet without a sound. A large black form loomed in to the looking-glass; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets veined with pink and grey, and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered" (Woolf 1985: 223). The intrusion of "a large black form" is later known as a pile of mail, which the narrator imagines to be invitations to dinners and parties.

The mirror offers no lasting truth, only a fleeting reflection. In reading this constantly shifting image, one must quickly infer what kind of person Isabelle is and what her life might be like. As seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf often imagines the human mind as a room; here, the narrator draws a parallel between Isabella's mind and her room:

Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails, pecked their way; and then her whole being was suffused, like the room again, with a cloud of some profound knowledge, some unspoken regret, and then she was full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters, like her cabinets. To talk of "prizing her open" as if she were an oyster, to use any but

the finest and subtlest and most pliable tools upon her was impious and absurd. One must imagine—here was she in the looking glass. (Woolf 1985: 225)

Woolf is not interested in penetrative knowledge of the old lady, for to attempt to “prize her open” would be both “impious and absurd.” Instead, the voyeuristic narrator relies on her imagination to make sense of the mirror scene, turning the unknown into something creative and accessible. At the same time, Woolf emphasizes the limitations of this gaze—her vision is always constrained by the rim of the mirror, and the shifting, elusive nature of Isabella’s inner self is mirrored by the ever-dancing pattern of light.

Woolf chooses the mirror as a metaphor for the process of storytelling because she understands that what she can reveal to the reader is, at best, only a “reflection.” In this story of storytelling, she dramatizes her belief that the world cannot be fully known or represented. Thus, what remains for us is a fragmented narrative, a montage of opaque images. Woolf makes it clear that modern art demands we engage with “the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure” (CE 337). Since her vision of Isabella is limited and framed by the mirror, Woolf chooses not to write directly about her, but to write “around” her, using the medium of glass to represent the difficulty and necessity of partial knowledge.

Conclusions

Glass in Virginia Woolf’s works serves as a potent metaphor that encapsulates the complexities of perception, identity, and societal roles in modern urban life. By drawing on the dual nature of glass as both a medium and a barrier, Woolf explores the tensions between visibility and invisibility, connection and isolation, as her characters navigate the challenges of self-representation and social expectations. The recurrent motifs of mirrors and windows in her writing reflect the ways in which individuals, particularly women, confront the limitations and contradictions of their inner and outer worlds. Woolf uses glass not only to represent the fluidity and uncertainty of modern existence but also to critique the pressures of societal norms and the often-impermeable boundaries between self and others. Ultimately, the metaphor of glass enables Woolf to explore the tension between transparency and opacity in human experience, revealing how perception shapes our understanding of both the world and ourselves. Through this lens, glass reflects not only the material realities of urban modernity but also Woolf’s evolving self-concept as a writer navigating the complexities of representation in a fragmented world.

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